杉原智則
イラスト●3
烙印の紋章
たそがれの星に竜は吠える
電撃文庫

Rakuin no Monshou

烙印の紋章 たそがれの星に竜は吠える

Emblem of the Branded
The Dragon Roars at the Star of Twilight

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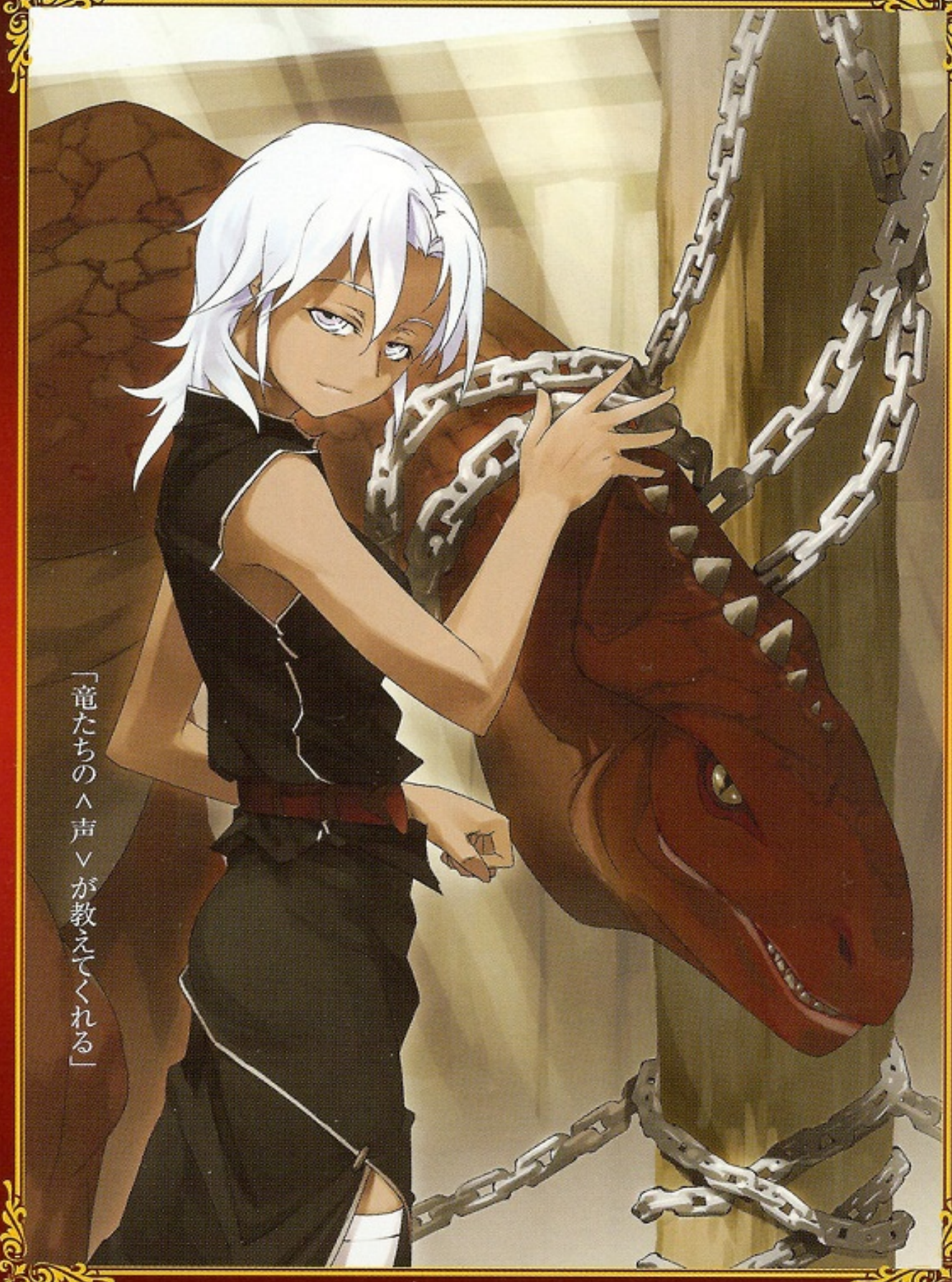
Illustrated by 3

Orba

A gladiator driven away from his village by war when young. A mask imitating the face of a tiger was forcefully put on him to make him the splitting image of Mephius' prince.

Vileena

Garbera Kingdom’s third princess. At the age of nine, she was taken prisoner and admirably stood up against the rebels. A strong minded princess, she is also Garbera's best airship pilot.



ホゥ・ラン

竜神信仰の遊牧民出身。オルパのいるタルカス剣闘会付きの竜の世話係。
竜に触れ、その<声>を聞くなど、独特な方法で竜を手なずける。

ゴーウェン

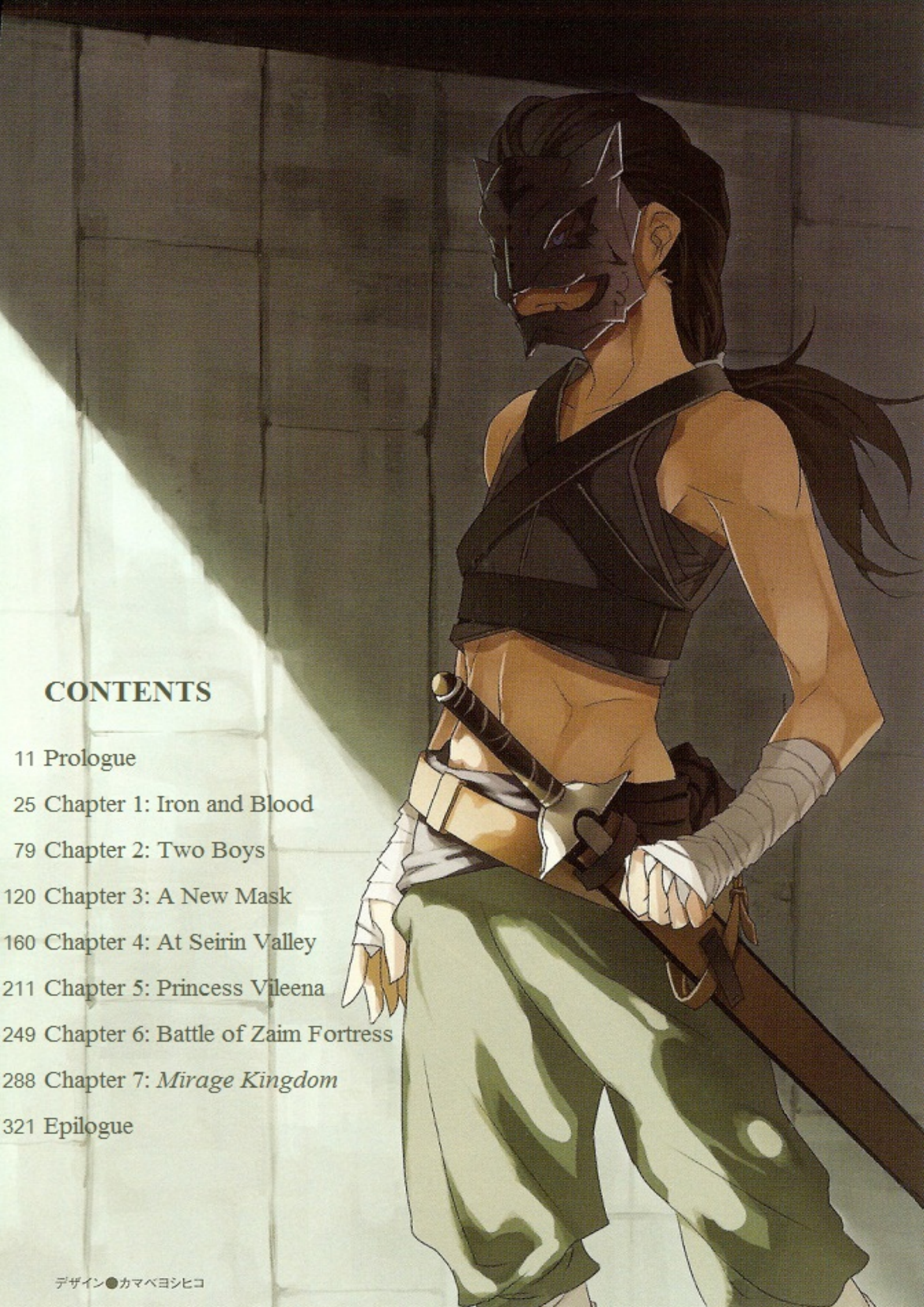
タルカス剣闘会の剣奴養成官にして、奴隷の監督長。
剣闘士となったオルバを鍛えた。剣の技と胆力を併せ持った実力者。

フェドム

メフィウスの貴族。反皇室的な立場を取り、ガーベラとの和平交渉を進めた中心メンバー。
知謀をめぐらし、自らの利権拡大を図る。

リュカオン

ガーベラ国の将軍にして高潔、清廉な騎士。かつてビリーナの許婚だった。
メフィウスとの戦争では国一番の手柄を挙げた。



CONTENTS

11 Prologue

25 Chapter 1: Iron and Blood

79 Chapter 2: Two Boys

120 Chapter 3: A New Mask

160 Chapter 4: At Seirin Valley

211 Chapter 5: Princess Vileena

249 Chapter 6: Battle of Zaim Fortress

288 Chapter 7: *Mirage Kingdom*

321 Epilogue

デザイン●カマベヨシヒコ

Prologue

“The princess is not there?”

“Indeed,” head maid Theresia explained with as bitter a look as possible. “Until a while ago, she was having tea with us in the central garden. Then she suddenly stated that she wanted to see the castle in the light of the setting sun from the roofs of Shikou Palace.”

“Shikou Palace… come to think of it, isn’t that where the departure point for airships is!?” the head of the western palace guard shouted in dismay.

"My!" Theresia made a face as if she just realized it for the first time as well. “What should we do? The princess is among the best pilots in our country. In the last race too, although she admirably became the runner-up, she flew into a rage, as if there was no meaning to it if she didn’t end up in first place. She was about to throw away the trophy of all things, and we were desperate to stop her.”

“Is that so? N-No… we shouldn’t get into that right now.”

While the captain started getting flustered, his subordinates behind him looked at each other apprehensively.

“What might she be up to?”

“I suppose she is planning on making a casual round of the capital on an airship. She must feel reluctant to leave.”

“No, it’s *that* princess. I’m sure she suddenly changed her mind about the marriage and decided to get away.”

“Even I don’t like it. It's outrageous that our Vileena, the third daughter of His Royal Highness and princess of Garbera, a country where we take pride in our chivalry, has to consent to a marriage with that monkey from Mephius!”

Some of them snorted through their noses and stamped their feet on the floor,

“No, she is a princess and would not do selfish things like that. We all know how mischievous and incredibly lively Princess Vileena is. But listen to me my friends; she is also someone who loves this country, its people, and its environment more than anybody else. She would not vitiate a contract with Mephius because of her own displeasure.”

While others calmly reproached their comrades.

"This is because we are spineless."

"Yeah. The Ten Year War with Mephius – what if we could've finished it with a victory on our side? If we could've raised Garbera's national flag at Mephius's palace, a thing… a thing like this…"

Shaking their heads in frustration, some ended up being moved to tears and sorrow.

All of this was proof that there must be love for her, or so Theresia thought. Garbera's third princess is Princess Vileena. Only fourteen years old, and after the coming week, she would be married into the Mephius Empire[1] bordering the country in the northwest.

Although Theresia herself would be accompanying the princess in order to look after her surroundings, of course, for many people in Garbera, this would be farewell. Everyone who now met with the princess, although able to congratulate her on her marriage, couldn't hide the loneliness, the anger, and the sorrow from their faces when they did.

Theresia was standing in a ceilinged corridor facing the garden on her right. On the side of a nearby pillar, a doodle of her, which had been drawn by the princess at a younger age, faintly remained. Theresia softly laid her hand on the drawing that depicted her in a devilish manner; the princess must have drawn it right after being scolded by her.

This is your last act of selfishness, okay, princess?

As she clung onto the captain of the guard, asking for an honest, desperate search for the princess, Theresia inwardly voiced her true thoughts.

About twenty kilometres southeast of Garbera Kingdom's capital city Phozon.

In a range of gentle hills, there was a palace overlooking a vast lake. During the rebellion that took place five years ago, the region had almost become the centre of war. But now it was much like its mild climate, at peace, with a relaxed time flowing by.

[1] The official name of the country is *The Imperial Dynasty of Mephius*, according to the kanji, but the author uses the reading for 'empire'. So, I'll be mainly using *Mephius Empire*, and only use the official name when the mood allows it to.

However, it was just before the sun was about to set when it suddenly became very lively.

"Third air defence fleet, ascend!" the commander of the air defence force yelled, straddled over his own airship. "The first and second protect all sides of the royal palace. The fourth hasten on to Phozon Capital."

Just five minutes ago, a flare signal had been raised from the watchtower. It was a signal that meant unidentified air units were approaching. And just now, they had confirmed visual of a single airship.

As the sky began to blend into the same colour as the surface, the air defence force rose into the air.

With a metal base made of dragonstone, steel, silver, brass, and the like, Garbera's ornithopter-type single-seated airships were modelled after the large sea eagles that inhabit the Mother Earth. From the bill to the tip of the tail, they were approximately three metres long, and the full span of their high-speed flapping wings was about seven metres. The pilots had their seats built where the eagle's claws would be as they whirled up into the sky.

I doubt a single unit would attack, though.

While the commander of the air defence force raised his suspicions, a deep black shape approached from the other side of the slope. It was the type which let the pilot lie with his belly directly on the hull during flight, and it wasn't an ornithopter, but had a rear propeller and rudder controlling its direction instead while moving forward via propulsion. It was a type of airship mainly built for speed.

Isn't that our country's?

The chief looked at it through narrowed eyes. Garbera excelled in the art of purifying dragon fossils into a weightless metal – the so-called dragonstone – and the country's development of small airships was unmatched by other countries. There were also many variations.

"Stop!"

"Don't go any further!"

Although the men on the air defence ships raised their shouts unanimously, the approaching unit did not show any signs of lowering its speed. It just passed by the airship of the third fleet's captain at a hair's distance and, as the airship was about to nearly lose its balance because of the near crash, the area suddenly grew tense.

“We told you to stop!”

“We’ll shoot if you don’t follow our warning!”

One craft blocked the course of the approaching unit that was flying straight ahead, the remainder went up, and took up positions to fire from the left and right. The commander himself was about to place a finger on the trigger that was directly connected to a machine gun, when,

“Thanks for doing your duty.”

Suddenly, a voice called out to him. It was a woman’s voice… or more precisely, a girl’s. He lifted his finger from the trigger.

Their airships were about to pass by each other, and her's left a platinum trail behind. When he realized that it was the pilot’s long hair streaming in the wind,

“Princess!?” the commander couldn’t help but raise his voice.

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry.”

The rapid words that returned came from the same voice, and then she was gone.

Everybody from the third air defence fleet was put off with equally flabbergasted expressions. Before long, gliding wings appeared from the airship near the small boards by the seat, and he just managed to see that she was steadily descending.

“Commander?”

“At ease.”

The commander of the air defence force was already into his mid-forties, and had a daughter who recently became fourteen. The same age as Garbera’s third princess Vileena. Fourteen years.

To him, it seemed like not much time had passed since he’d seen the tottering steps of his baby daughter. But the world already saw her as an adult member of society, and even if she got married and started having children at this age, no one would think of it as strange.

“Call back the fourth air defence fleet. I have to return to my post and write my journal: today, we’ve seen nothing but a peaceful sky.”

He was fixedly staring at the moon outside through the window.

Sitting up in bed, although his features, exposed by the pale light, neared the limits of age, the grace and austerity that he seemed to naturally possess was still going strong.

“I thought it was strangely noisy tonight, but I guess it must have been you.”

He spoke the words as he looked up at the moon.

“Yes, it’s me.”

The answer came from the side.

A shadow came in from the room’s entrance. With every step that was brought forward, the figure was gradually revealed by the moonlight, eventually producing the appearance of a girl.

“My son wouldn’t turn a blind eye if he saw you like this. In a certain sense, he is a man older than me.”

The old man laughed, as he looked at the approaching figure clad in airship riding gear. Although she was still more of a child than a woman, the outfit wound perfectly around her body, and the increasingly dangerous curves seemed to be maturing day by day.

The girl let a smile come onto her face, like a flower in bloom.

“Quite so. That’s why, when I participated in the race, he opposed it until the very end. Although he agreed it was good to humour the people, he said this manner wouldn’t do, and that I should wear clothes more suitable for a member of the Garbera Royal Family, among other things. There was no way I'd do it, with the hem of a long skirt hindering me. That’s why I had to content myself with second place.”

“That wasn’t a bad appearance either,” the previous King of Garbera, Jeorg Owell, said, as he smiled at his pouting granddaughter. “Although, because you ended up one point away from victory, I suffered a heavy loss.”

“Did you put a wager on me?”

Jeorg laughed with mirth upon seeing the girl’s eyes open wide.

“With the secretary of financial affairs, Wallace. That bloke… he wanted my favourite horse for a long time already. But while *he* works at the royal palace, I

wasn't informed that you were participating in a skirt. If I'd known, I would've have scolded that son of mine relentlessly for letting you race like that in public."

"So, what is it that grandfather wanted from Secretary Wallace?"

"Haha… well, what was it again?"

"Secretary Wallace is quite famous for his liquor collection, isn't he?"

"There's that too. Hm… that guy has an excellent tastes in women too."

"Oh?"

"Back when we went to visit Wallace's mansion, the chamberlain's daughter who worked there – well, although she is his daughter, she's already back with her parents at the age of thirty. But, she's quite a beauty. I figured, if I get the lass to work at this detached place of mine, it was likely my life would become a little bit more worth living for."

"Oh, grandfather."

Garbera's third princess, Vileena, puffed up her cheeks, and although she made sure to give her grandfather a scolding glare, the two of them immediately burst into laughter.

The sides of the curtains, filled with the pale moonlight, fluttered slightly in the all but nonexistent wind. Suddenly, Vileena crouched down near the bed and firmly took hold of her grandfather's hand. She pressed her face against it, her small shoulders shaking.

"Vileena, this… what's the matter? You're acting like a child."

"No. No, no…"

She closed her eyelids firmly, repeating her denial, frantically trying to resist the emotions that were welling up inside from whatever was eating at her mind.

He's become so small.

She thought, as she laid her face into his thin, helpless hand.

Her grandfather was known for his bravery in his younger days. Subduing the stronger local clans one by one, he had pushed this country called Garbera up to the point that it wouldn't lose to the other major powers. In the past, their territories had been invaded by the older nations of either Ende or Mephius time and time again,

and their people had tasted hardship and exile under their rule. Now, everyone praised Jeorg Owell's bravery, despite his short history, for producing a united country that was no longer inferior to those foreign nations.

Ever since she was young, Vileena had become attached to her grandfather. He still had a strong influence, even after withdrawing from the throne, and although his son, namely Vileena's father, thought he was a shrewish and troublesome existence that he nonetheless couldn't help but rely on, to Vileena, he was no one other than a kind grandfather.

So many times had she come to visit him at his estate, going to the river to fish or swim together, and when the days got dark, spending all evening simulating war campaigns at the board table.

Unlike her father, her grandfather did not get angry when Vileena played with a wooden sword and shield, allowed her to scuffle together with children for play, let her ride horses, and cultivated her interest in airships. Rather than scold her, he instructed her carefully about these things in detail.

But above all, during the winter, her grandfather would sit near the hearth, lift her up to his knee, and tell her stories about war, about negotiating with other countries, about the many powerful clans in Garbera, and how to prevent the sparks of dispute in the country from breaking out into a tinderbox of civil war – Vileena became addicted to these stories.

And every evening she heard such a tale, when Vileena set to bed, she would always have a dream.

Dressed in shining armour, standing there on top of an airship, overlooking the valiant knights arrayed before her, giving them her orders. Her young heart was coloured with excitement as she imagined herself standing on the battlefield one day, fighting at her grandfather's side.

However, ever since the winter, her once robust grandfather's health deteriorated and he had become bedridden.

Whenever Vileena came to visit, he had a smile on his face that was not different from before, but they were no longer able to ride horses or fly airships together. And then, five years ago, something happened that had given her grandfather the final blow.

"Raise your head."

Urged by her grandfather's words, a startled Vileena did as she was told. Trying to fight back the tears, her eyes were brightly sparkling in the moonlight's glow. Jeorg's face crumpled.

"I see. I too, am getting old. Aren't you the springy, tomboyish girl that will be getting married within the week? The same girl that needed so very little time to trample down my garden and destroy my prized flowerbed like some wicked, untamed dragon?"

"G-Grandfather..."

"But I was even more surprised back in the day. I think you must be sick of this story, but word travelled all across the country. Five years ago, when the rebels had usurped this very estate, you did not even put one step back and magnificently tried to fight them off to protect me, while I was lying injured in bed. Everybody here said if only you were a boy. However, I didn't think so. You are a fine lady – the pride of Garbera. No champion, no dragon, not anything that can be bought with gold can compare to you. You are my pride."

Jeorg gently held her Vileena's blushing cheeks in both his hands.

"That granddaughter is about to marry. What kind of child will she give birth to, I wonder? I try not to have any regrets in this life of mine, and it is something that I proudly boast of. But if there is one regret, there is only one – that I won't be able to see the sight of you holding a baby with my own eyes."

"What are you saying? This evening doesn't have to be a farewell," Vileena said, forcing a bright tone and a smile.

However, she already knew the truth. Her grandfather had been bedridden for a long time now, and he no longer left his estate. Within several days, she would leave the country on her own, so she had actually come here to say her final goodbye.

Her smile immediately fell apart, and Vileena brought down her face again. Lowering her eyebrows, anger clouded her beautiful face.

"Grandfather. I don't want to go and become someone's wife. I don't want to leave your side grandfather, I hate it. But even so… Why does it have to be Mephius, of all places!?"

For a moment, the face of tomboyish princess, who was loved from all over the country, looked like that of an ordinary country lass who was about to marry, with a hint of heartfelt sadness. However,

"That country of barbarians. It is obvious the rebellion that led grandfather to be injured by those traitors was staged by Mephius. If only father had the resolve to let me, on the bridal night, I would readily slice open the sleeping head of my husband to be!"

"Oh, hey now…"

Even the undaunted Jeorg reflexively had a jagged coughing fit. While it also resulted in a personality brusque enough to visit her grandfather like this, she had, somewhere in her way of thinking, been influenced by the out-dated, old-fashioned portion of her grandfather's upbringing all this time.

"You do not always draw blood during battles. And victory is not only gained over the opponent's corpse. You have a gentle heart, so you've realised this a long time ago. Even the common people wage constant battles in their everyday lives. Although it may seem nothing compared to the majestic days of old, bringing us a time of peace also counts as a victory."

"……"

"Mephius is an old country – much, much older than your father's – and may seem a bit strict, but if it's you, it'll be fine. Because, wherever you are, you are my Vileena."

"I understand."

When Vileena raised her head a second time, the tears were already gone. The moon gently lighting the outlines of her smiling face invited her grandfather to smile as well.

"Indeed. This battle is not yet over. Not all soldiers pick up swords and lances. I too, am one such soldier, right?"

His granddaughter's eyes were sparkling, and he felt the hint of something unpleasant.

"I understand. I will not shed blood, nor will I ask the people of Garbera to do the unreasonable. For this new battle, I – Vileena – will take up the challenge. I'll probe Mephius's true state of affairs, find out its weaknesses – I will use any means necessary, so please wait for me to bring us the glad tidings of victory!"

His fourteen-year-old granddaughter stood up in an instant, leaving Jeorg agape.

From a young innocent girl who was soon to be married off, she had suddenly turned into a knight on the battlefield before he realized it. While looking at how she

was now boiling with excitement, her cheeks flushed and her blood set afire, he thought that, in a sense, that was truly how he knew his granddaughter.

Chapter 1 – Iron and Blood

Part 1

The outcome was decided.

The amphitheatre of Ba Roux shook. The many spectators that were crowded together unanimously shouted out the victor's name and stamped their feet, creating a racket that sounded much like a tidal wave.

While the winner was being bathed in the passionate and boisterous cheers, the one who had received the opposite fate lay motionless besides his feet. Eventually, the loser's headless body was struck with a hook and dragged away by the hands of two slaves.

The sun was still glaring even though it was near evening. The spectators' faces were covered with sweat and glittering brightly, as if someone smeared them with oil, and their eyes, too, were sparkling with bloodlust, as they anticipated the next fight to be yet another battle to the death. Whoever just won or lost didn't stay on their minds for long. It was only the heat of battle that left an everlasting taste, stood in the air, and kept whirling around the arena.

"Go, go!"

"Do it, kill!"

Today was another success. Because the more virtuous people living in the city, for whom the admission fees were no more than about a child's weekly allowance, were able to watch the games, over a thousand spectators were gathered.

The next match was a cavalry battle. Both men were armed with spears, emerging from the east and west gates, and crossed each other at a great speed. At the second charge, one of the men got flung off of his mount and, as he scrambled to get up again, the other swiftly jumped off his own horse to give the finishing blow.

Up next were two barely clothed men, who started to grapple each other with their bare hands.

They were sword-slaves, or so-called gladiators. In compensation for doing these public, life-threatening battles, these people were granted a few days of their lives and the minimum amount of food required to get by. Some of them were already born as slaves, some had been thrown into the arena for committing crimes, and there were even those who had personally applied to cast themselves into this living hell.

But if gladiators got well-known enough to become veterans, they received a different kind of popularity from the crowd. One of them, named Shique, was a handsome gladiator who was popular among women and had just won the brawling match. He was strangely pretentious, bowing in a way much like a nobleman would, and notably, shrill voices rose from the crowd.

“Did you see that, brother? Shique just won!” [2]

It was the voice of a girl yet in the more tender years of age, who was sitting in one of the grandstands among the front row seats. High pillars, which rose from the corners in the left and right, supported a roof that covered the stand. Only those who were able to pay a large sum of money were able to view the match from these special seats.

From the looks of it, the young man resting his chin on his hands next to her, whom she called ‘brother’, seemed to be dissatisfied. With a long cloth wrapped around his head, the ends dangling from both the left and right just like a believer of Badyne, it looked like he was concealing his face from the glances of people around him.

“Ahh, it is as you say,” he said. “The gladiator you had your eye on won. Now, isn’t that enough? Can we hurry and get something to eat? This place is giving me a headache.”

"But it is only beginning, is it not? Did the smell of blood sicken you? You, the successor of the lands of Mephius?"

“Watch your mouth.”

Not at all worried about the youth’s clear jumpiness, the girl gave a fickle laugh.

The next fight had already started, so the young man was forced to stay after all and rested his cheeks on his hands again with a bitter look on his face. How much blood had to be splattered around, and how many sweaty muscles did she have to see before getting tired of it?

[2] She actually calls him お義兄様 ‘ogikei-sama’, which, in this case, means he’s her step-brother. However, she pronounces it as ‘onii-sama’.

He occasionally stole a sidelong glance at the young girl's white skin and beautiful face. She had an innocence that matched her age, but a strange sensual and mature beauty as well – it was a view much more charming than that of the savage fight below.

Then, after about two battles, a new stage was being set in the arena. One huge stake got established in the centre, and a single woman was fastened to the top. She was a beautiful woman. Purposely made to wear torn clothes, each time she writhed in pain, her breasts and thighs swayed about while whistles came from the heated male audience.

However, the woman was in no position to be bothered with their obscene looks, for at the same time the stake got put up, a big cage with approximately the same height was carried in.

Inside was a raging beast that was roughly seven or eight metres long. Its slimy, green scales were flickering in the sunlight. It was a large dragon. Bred through repeated selective breeding by humans, it was of a variety called 'Sozos' that Mephius also used in wars.

Its clenched, humongous teeth, and each of its claws extending from six legs, were just like sharp swords. Probably because it was drugged, it seemed to have a somewhat repressed ferociousness and dulled instincts, but being hit by that bulk would nevertheless cause serious injuries, and it looked like it could blow away the steel cage like a toy.

"Now then! Gathered ladies and gentlemen!"

Suddenly an orator standing on an elevation began to speak over a loudspeaker, eager to finish his speech before the beast broke out.

"Next, is the start of our programme. The great dragons once roamed the earth and have likely established our culture, now they are no more than this bloodthirsty, simple beast we look down on. There is no need to fear. We are the brave souls, the purest of minds, that took over from an era of space voyage. Not even by the dragon's tusks and claws – not to mention its fearsome, terrible breath! – will we be outdone. Please, take a look at the evidence. Behold the figures of these brave men who challenge this dragon of old, this beast of a terrifying false god!"

From the eastern gate, a single gladiator stepped forward. In the man's hands, who sported a muscular body, was an iron ball connected to a chain.

"Ballchain Verne!"

The audience's cheers became even louder, for he was a gladiator who could pride himself in being one of the most famous fighters in Ba Roux. The man was about in his mid-thirties with dark skin, and he responded by waving a hand to the ladies and gentlemen in the audience. Then,

"It's the Tiger!"

"Look, Iron Tiger Orba!"

A swordsman, also alone, walked out, but from the western gate.

"How eccentric," the young man commented on the steel blue mask that was covering gladiator's face. As if imitating a tiger, small fangs protruded up from the lips, leaving only a small space for the mouth of this man named Orba underneath. Cut out into two splits were openings where the tiger's eyes would've been, but naturally it was only Orba's eyes peeking through. And, despite a tiger normally having rounded ears, the mask had pointed ends at both sides instead – it was almost as if horns were coming out from the corners.

However, that was all; he had no other outstanding character features. In comparison with Verne, he had an almost feeble body build, and he only held a simple, common longsword in his hand.

The spectators started ridiculing him, saying,

"Look at his thin body. Just one hit of the ballchain will completely smash him up!"

"They say he took off Meier the Baron's head at the Arena of Tidan after only two strikes. Let's see him do the same to our Verne. Go on then!"

"This Iron Tiger Orba," the girl said, as her cheeks blushed with excitement. "Isn't this his first appearance in Ba Roux? But he seems to be famous. Do you know of him, brother?"

"How should I know?"

"My, what a cold reply. Fine, if you're so bored with being here, why don't we have a little bet on this game? Maybe it'll end up getting you a little interested."

"A wager, is it? For what, and how?"

"Simple. Of those two about to fight, who do you expect to win?"

"That's stupid. How's that even a bet? Even I know the name of that Verne guy. And his physique is way better. Even an amateur can see that. You're just trying to rip me off, betting on the clear victor yourself, aren't you?"

"My, you're a difficult customer! But that's fine. You can just sulk away like that as long as you like. And I even thought of bringing you along so you could have a little distraction. But I got it, I understand – you hate spending time with Ineli. If that's the case, I will never invite you again, don't worry!"

The girl stiffly turned away her face, as the young man panickingly stopped resting his chin on his hands.

"W-Wait. I was wrong," he said. "I'll bet on that masked swordsman. That's what you want, right?"

"No. Ineli decided to bet on that swordsman first. You can take Ballchain Verne, brother."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because I like him."

Even though you can't see his face? – was what the young man was about to say, but he stopped himself in time. He couldn't afford to displease her even more.

"Now then," the orator said, raising his voice again. "Will Orba or will Verne take up the role of the hero and set that woman free? Or will these rivals be fighting in vain, as the cage breaks and this poor, beautiful lady ends up in the dragon's stomach?"

From there on, the two swordsmen would battle, and the winner would rescue the woman – or, as the orator stated, 'a certain princess from a ruined country' – from the dragon's clutches, and also earn a night of love-making. Or so the scene was set out to be.

The two men both stepped forward at the same time. As they approached each other, the lack in Orba's physique became all the more apparent. Verne spoke in a voice that could be heard by those in the front row seats.

"So, you call yourself a tiger, huh? I've heard your name. But, there's nothing more unreliable than a rumour. You can try to hide your face, but I can see the skin underneath. You're still young, just a kid."

Ballchain Verne's thick lips, in proportion to the rest of him, bent into a smile.

"I'm sure the mask is just a bluff so people won't make fun of you. You're not a tiger, you're just a mangy cur! I'll teach you what a real man's battle truly is all about!"

Facing Verne, who was loudly laughing at his shoulders, Orba didn't reply. Probably assuming his nerves were blown away, Verne gave a sneering look, took up a defensive stance, and slung the ballchain over his shoulder.

"Start!"

There was a pointed signalling voice, but it halfway disappeared into the further increasing sound of the audience's cheers. In an instant, Verne made his move.

He wielded the iron ballchain with all his strength. At first, the masked swordsman was about to rush in, but, as if panicked by his sheer force, he quickly stepped back. There was a small spark as the iron ball chafed against the mask. It was enough for Verne to take pursuit of the stumbling Orba. The huge iron ball, which was much larger than a human head, approached with the howling of the wind, and Orba continued to avoid it by stepping back.

He rolled over the ground, excessively jumped aside, and finally bustled about by making an evasive gesture – which invited laughter from the spectators.

"Look at that, it seems the swordsman you like can't get out of a tight spot," the same young man said. "Or could it be that this fight isn't so fair and square?"

"You think?" the girl said, looking straight ahead as she put a finger to her plump and florid lips. "If that's so, then why hasn't the match ended yet?"

"That's because his opponent keeps pitifully running from place to place."

"I wonder why Verne can't corner an opponent who so clumsily keeps running away."

The young man wanted to say something in return but kept his mouth shut. As he watched, he noticed that Orba wasn't outright retreating, but kept circling around his opponent while maintaining a fixed distance. And it looked like Verne was no longer able to attack and pursue his opponent so hastily either.

Probably because he lost his temper, Verne put all of his strength into tossing another blow. The iron ball flew past Orba's shoulder and – although it seemed obvious to the bystanders that this was like a golden opportunity – he only returned a slight thrust with his sword, while once again taking his distance.

"Get serious!"

"Stop messing around!"

The audience stopped laughing and started jeering down at the arena. Not only at Orba, but also at Verne who didn't seem able to take down his constantly fleeing opponent.

"You bastard!" Verne howled.

When he tried to rush at Orba diagonally, the girl suddenly raised her voice, "Ah!", in surprise.

Orba, who had until now only retreated backwards, suddenly started to pitch forward. Stopping in his tracks, Verne, too, took the opportunity to strike another blow.

Orba tilted his body wide to the right, avoiding the iron ball and, as he rotated on his left toe, flashed his sword in a diagonal uppercut. The moment the chain got cut apart, a strange, clear sound echoed throughout the arena, then Orba twisted his body again and swung his sword downward with the force of a thunderbolt.

Verne's cranium was split in two and the giant collapsed soon after.

"M-Magnificent!" the orator cried.

However, because it had happened so swiftly and came with such an unexpected conclusion, the audience was looking rather flabbergasted. Although the awkward silence wrapped around the arena, the victor didn't seem to care either way and headed up to the stake, and, borrowing the hands of a number of slaves to lift it from the ground, used his sword to cut the ropes that kept the woman bound.

With a shout of delight, she joyfully clung onto his neck, only to be pushed away with a confused look on her face as Orba immediately started to return to his gate.

The girl in the special seat – she had also been staring agape at the sudden fall of the curtain – slowly began to form her lips into a smile. That gladiator named Orba didn't seem aware of the audience at all. As if stating the only reason he was here today was to fight, and to kill as he was told.

"He… took out Verne."

"With one blow."

After that moment of silence, voices praising Orba began to raise little by little. Now that the mood had grown uneasy for the visitors, slowly the clapping of hands, the awkward stamping of feet, and cheers appropriate for a victor started to fill the stands. Then, almost at the instant the arena had returned to the state it was supposed to be in, the air shook heavily.

It was the roar of the Sozos Dragon.

It might have been the drug wearing off, or an instinctive reaction to the smell of blood, but all of a sudden it started swaying its enormous body from right to left, shattering a portion of its cage. One of the slaves who'd been in the process of towing everything away, was caught and raised from the head by the dragon's claw. Before he could resist, his torso disappeared into the Sozos's mouth.

There was the sound of breaking bones. And at the same time as the awful sound of salivated chewing could be heard, the arena grounds were suddenly filled with screams. In the midst of all the fear and panic that rapidly swept over the area, the Sozos rather calmly stretched out its limbs further and emerged from the broken cage.

Being pulled along into the crowd that strived to be the first to escape, the young man from earlier almost fell to the floor. But then, he was pulled along by a hand from the side.

"This way. Hurry!"

It was one of the soldiers who'd been guarding the special seats. As he rattled around with a sword and gun, he tried to bring the young man back inside.

"W-Wait. Ineli's…"

Although he tried to resist, he couldn't move freely as he kept being jostled by the crowd of people trying to escape. Then, he heard a suspiciously familiar, high-pitched scream. Right in front of the Sozos's forepaws beyond the dividing wall, was a figure that belonged to no one other than Ineli. The girl had turned a pale colour as she had tumbled over from the gallery, and it looked like she was about to lose consciousness any minute.

The dragon's long snout opened from top to bottom. As the rows of tusks, similar to sharp pointed swords, opened up, they formed long threads of slaver. The young man was about to involuntarily avert his eyes, when a thin streak of blood spouted from the Sozos's neck. The gladiator arena's employed guards had rushed in with guns. However, because they were close to the seats, they could only shoot at point-blank range, and from the way they stood, they hardly had the nerve. While they were conflicted at what to do while it approached, the Sozos turned around quickly and hit them with a single blow of its tail, fully sending several people flying.

The girl had sank down to the floor, her eyes opened wide looking at her surroundings.

Then, from those eyes, she saw.

There was a shadow that ran past the Sozos's flank like a gust of wind. Just before it came up against the brick wall that divided the seats from the ring, the shadow kicked against it and soared up into the air. A man with a tiger-imitating iron mask jumped into the girl's sight, the figure of Orba the gladiator landing on top of the Sozos's head.

Even though she had just witnessed him running up to the Sozos from behind while the dragon was distracted by bullets, she couldn't suddenly believe it.

Despite Orba's slim body, his joints and muscles seemed to fortify his arms like steel as he grabbed a firm hold of the dragon's neck. While further sandwiching its neck between his legs, he held on tight with one arm and, with his other, brought his sword down into the head.

It swung its long tail around and rocked the ground by stamping its feet, but the dragon still struggled, not able to shake off the gladiator. It shook off a second strike. But the third tore through its scales, as tough as iron armour, and pieces of flesh and blood got splattered about. However, the sword broke when it came to the fourth strike, but at that time the other gladiators rushed in.

"Orba!"

Receiving a thrown sword from a brown-skinned swordsman, Orba once again raised it for a fifth attack, following the exact same process as earlier, until he fully caved the middle of the blade into the crown of the dragon's head.

Its golden eyes goggled longingly at the skies. Just before its huge body sunk from the neck, the swordsman had swooped down next to the guest seats.

The girl, still kneeling on the floor, was looking up at him. It was almost as if he came from a tale, for she felt like a princess caught by an evil wizard, and although she fixed her eyes on him with a throbbing heart, of all things, the would-be-hero gladiator continued his walk, completely ignoring her, and nimbly jumped off the dividing wall and back into the ring.

There was still a cloud of chaotic fear hanging over the arena as he showed her his back and took his leave, but rather than drifting the air of a victor, he looked more like a solitary figure that could hardly endure the stares on him.

"A-Are you okay?"

She turned her eyes to the young man she had brought with her, who came running up to her with bated breath, and suddenly got an odd sensation. She had only seen it with a passing glance earlier, but the eyes underneath that swordsman's mask seemed to closely resemble those of the young man.

And there was yet another man who focused a long look at Orba's back, surprised for another reason.

"No way, he is alive."

He wiped the sweat from his slightly slacking chin with the back of his hand. Standing behind the young man's back - he was also one of the men who'd been at the special seats - he was speaking to himself in wonder as the unique smell of blood drifted about.

"Orba was his name? Two years... Two entire years, huh."

Part 2

"Two years."

The gladiator, Orba, staring up at the darkness surrounding him, suddenly murmured those words in his mouth. Although only 'two years' into this line of

work, it had been full of hardships, blood, and corpses. How many times had he struggled for his life, only to have both his feet chained at the end, spend the night in the slave pens, where his only pastime was to train all morning in order to keep living as a sword-slave? And then there would be another fight.

No one, except Orba himself, expected him to be able to live through more than five battles. Two years ago, when Orba first set foot in the arena, he'd still been fourteen years old. His body had been even thinner than it was now, and he'd hardly been able to handle the weapons.

However, at the moment of truth, he'd survived. He brandished the weapon held in his hands, chosen from one of the few weapons he was able to wield, to the limits of his power. He only knew how to fight by recklessly charging in. As he gained experience, his skill, the thickness of each of his muscle fibres, the mastery of new weapons, as well as the opponent's corpses he stepped over, increased every time he emerged from another fight.

And so, two years passed. Orba didn't know whether that was a long or a short time. Sometimes, he thought he was a considerably old person, but he also felt like a youngster at times who still didn't know anything at all about battles.

Anyway, maybe it simply had to do with the fact, that he had not been blessed with the opportunity to see his own face. Lying face up, he was still wearing the same iron mask he wore in the battle ring. Because it had never been removed those two years, the other sword-slaves belonging to the same Tarkas Gladiatorial Group had no way of knowing his true face.

"Get up, slaves! You hate wakin' up? Then get ready for your worst day yet!"

When morning came, another day for the slaves began. The one in charge of training the sword-slaves, and the slaves' main supervisor, was Gowen, who drove everyone from their bedrooms and made them start cleaning the accommodations.

When that was finished, taking care of the lions, serpents, boars, tigers and the like – the animals that were used in the arena – was waiting. In particular, taking care of the dragons was hard work. Even taking care of the small- and medium-sized dragons was too much for a single person to handle, but taking care of the large-sized Sozos dragons was far worse. While it was expected for slaves to die by the sword, many had also been crushed underfoot by these dragons that were purposefully trained not to grow accustomed to humans.

Orba set foot in the vast dragon's abode, which was much larger than the slaves' dwellings – far from it – and resembled a castle courtyard, but he stopped in his tracks when he noticed the back of a woman.

She was Hou Ran. Of all the other slaves ordered to feed the dragons, she was the only one who directly touched the dragons' scales. Of course, the dragons' legs and necks were wrapped in chains, as it was not necessary to carry out yesterday's example, but that was by no means an absolute guarantee. At a distance that would even cause a gladiator to hesitate, greeting each dragon one by one, she gently touched their scales with her fingers.

"Orba."

Calling out his name, she quickly turned around.

"So I've been found out."

"I've been told by the 'voice' of the dragons."

Ran smiled. She seemed truly unsuitable in an all-men, not to mention savage, sword-slave detention camp, and Orba still hadn't gotten used to her defenceless smile.

Her skin like polished ebony, combined with hair that seemed to have turned pale, gave off a mysterious charm. Originating from the Dragon God worshipping nomads that roamed in the western mountains of Mephius, unlike her primarily reclusive kin, Ran had exceptionally been brimming with curiosity, secretly boarded one of her tribe's caravan wagons and came over to the outside world. Because she never told him exactly what had happened after that, he did not know when Tarkas hired her, and how she could take care of the dragons single-handedly like this.

"Do these guys know my name?"

"Their 'voices' come like images into my head. They all know your face, Orba. You're liked by the dragons."

While it appeared idiotic, in fact, it seemed like her pupils, clearly giving the impression of being deep under the sea, held some kind of intelligence lost to civilized men. From the other side of the fence, the small-type dragons were poking out their snouts and snapping at him.

"It doesn't look that way," Orba said with a thin smile.

At the time Orba turned up two years ago, Hou Ran was already at the detention camp. Back then, although she didn't make direct eye contact with the others employed by Tarkas, she didn't even open her mouth to him. Whether they would see Orba's face or hear Ran's voice first, soon became the target of bets among the sword slaves short of entertainment.

But, one time, Ran was about to be roughed up by several new sword-slaves who'd recently come into the camp. Orba just happened to pass by and had beaten them up, and ever since then Ran had at least been able to speak to him a bit.

"I heard you were attacked by a Sozos at Ba Roux."

"*I* was the one who attacked the Sozos," he emphasized. "It suddenly started getting violent."

"Even with drugs, it's useless to imprison its heart by force. If I had been the one supervising it, such a thing would have never happened."

She bit her lips, but it was not because she was concerned about Orba or the visitors. With the figure of a girl patting the nape of a medium-sized Baian dragon in the corner of his eye, Orba finished his own work and left the dragon's abode behind him.

After feeding the animals and cleaning was done, it was time to tend to their weapons. Because they left their own lives in their care, they carefully did them one by one. Whenever they handled weapons, about ten guards in full armour acted as supervisors. Naturally, they were there to make sure none of the sword-slaves tried to revolt.

Then, after finishing a meal with a sorry amount of bread and soup – the survivors of yesterday's gladiator matches were treated meat and fruit as a reward – they each began their training at the start of noon. Just like when they'd been tending the weapons, there were armed soldiers on the lookout, but this time, the chains that connected both feet were taken off.

Sword-slaves that lasted over two years like Orba were extremely rare. Lives were lost one after another, and new faces always appeared again on the next day. Gowen tirelessly taught them the step work of how to hold a sword or how to handle a gun, and trained them thoroughly until they were fully prepared.

Orba also had some of the newcomers as opponents. Sometimes they clashed swords, just like in an actual fight, and it wasn't uncommon for someone to part with a limb or lose his life in the midst of training..

Today, there weren't any casualties. But that did not have to mean they were lucky. The next day may hold an even more miserable fate, and grislier deaths may be awaiting for these gladiators.

When all the faces of the sword-slaves had turned dark, their skin wet with sweat and covered in dust, Orba moved to the fence separating the training grounds from an aisle on the other side and caught sight of Tarkas's figure.

Saying "At ease!" at the newcomer, Orba rushed up towards him.

Also noticing the masked man, Tarkas stopped in his tracks. There was a feeling of distrust slipping through his sagged cheeks.

"What is it, Iron Tiger? Ahh… good job yesterday." He had a look on his face as if he just now remembered he forgot to feed his pet dog. "Verne was quickly becoming a well-known gladiator. The other gladiator troupe started talking about wanting to pit him against you. 'Can't we earn back all the money we invested in Verne that

way?' – don't try that sarcastic bullshit on me. Well, I suppose I feel a bit grateful as well. And killing that Sozos—"

"Tarkas, how much longer do I have to continue winning?"

"What's that?"

"It's been two years already. I've kept winning all the time. How many times do I have to be the 'main event' like yesterday. Isn't it about time you take these chains off of my feet?"

Sword-slaves, all of them, were each exchanged on a contract when bought by a merchant. Although Tarkas seemed to handle it quite vaguely.

"Don't think I can't read. Even a slave should have the right to look into my contract. I've been waiting here, Tarkas. I should've been allowed to leave a long time ago."

As Orba spoke right in front of him, Tarkas sharply put a squinting look in his eyes.

"So, where do you plan to go? Surely you can be released from my hands, but you'll still be a criminal. You don't have the money to pay off your remaining prison term. Or maybe you want to work in the Tsaga Mines along the western border? Poisonous gases, wild man-eating beasts, human-hunting Geblin tribes, and – of course – extremely miserable and rigorous labour. If it's the same hell, or if you think you may have it better off here, hurry up and get back to your training. And don't ever speak to me like an equal, until you've become a full-fledged swordsman that earns his pay."

Thrusting his thick finger in Orba's face, Tarkas quickly took his leave, heading for his office. Behind him, unfamiliar faces followed suit. Considering this was a place where legs were tied up in chains, they were probably newly procured slaves.

Orba was silent. His eyes were teeming with rage however, but Tarkas's words weren't lies either. Concerning Mephian law, you can basically either sell your life or go to prison. Like the Mines of Tsaga that Tarkas spoke of – should he apply for the country's public service, accompanied by dangers, and sell himself off as a slave there?

Grasping the fence tightly in his hands, he lost all sense of feeling in his fingers before he knew it, Orba remained there standing in place.

"What are you doing, Orba!? Get back here!"

After finally being rebuked by Gowen, he went back to practice. As always.

A few hours after that, after washing their bodies with a cupful of water, it was time for their second meal of the day. Orba, rounding up his body like a hunchback in the corner of the dining hall, was almost grasping at his food. As a habit, he couldn't go through a meal without reading a book.

Then,

"Orba, good job yesterday."

Another sword-slave, the one named Shique, nestled onto his back, and Orba roughly shook him off with his hand.

"That ballchain Verne chap. When the match was decided, I didn't know what to do. If you seemed to get into a huge disadvantage, I considered shooting him down from the outside."

"Go away. Unless you want me to wound that smug face of yours."

"Ooh, scary. But I wouldn't mind any wound you give me, for it'll become a bond between me and you."

Even though it was hard, despite Shique's chuckling behaviour, to make an accurate judgement on whether he was serious or making a joke, Orba didn't socialize with him either way. The handsomely Shique had grown out his hair and even used make-up when it came to a gladiatorial battle. And just like that, because it seemed to further his degenerate good looks, he was tremendously popular among the female crowd. Even though the person himself was a self-styled, huge misogynist.

"However, I expected no less from you, Orba. Even without me lending you a hand, you managed to make a truly magnificent performance. Are you, both in name and reality, Tarkas's top gladiator, I wonder?"

"I wouldn't say it was magnificent."

Gowen, the one in charge of training the gladiators, made his appearance. Although Orba showed plain the annoyance in his eyes as he sat down at the same table, he didn't seem to mind.

"Although you did well, it's a fact that it was also dangerous. When you broke in, your timing was still too hasty. It's a bad habit of yours to take risks when you're driven into a corner, only if even by a bit. You should spend more time putting an effort into ensuring your predominance. Although Verne was a brilliant swordsman, he wasn't the type to target his opponent's weak points. But a more observant opponent could easily see through your quick temper, and sweep you off your feet."

He was a grey-haired man in his mid-fifties, but he still had a stout and tanned body, and the peering glances he gave the sword-slaves were filled with intensity.

“His opponent was that Verne, though. That guy was, curiously enough, in perfectly good shape,” a new voice called out, belonging to Tarkas Gladiatorial Group’s number one giant, Gilliam.

He had been in the same arena as Orba and Shique the day before, carrying a battle-ax on his shoulder, and with that the three strongest sword-slaves were gathered together. With long auburn hair in as much disorder as possible, his face, grinning with clenched teeth, had a look as intimidating as that of a wild lion.

“When I heard you had to go against Verne, I honestly thought you ran out of luck. Well, you don’t have bad skills. But, as usual, you still don’t know what it means to be a gladiator. It’s worthless if you win gracelessly. It won’t satisfy the guests. The way you carelessly kept running from place to place and then suddenly decided the match with one blow was just not entertaining at all. You’ve got to hit them up front.”

For someone like a sword-slave, it wasn’t just about winning the match. You had to be popular, in short, make sure that a lot of visitors come to see that gladiator alone. Plain gladiators, after finally having earned a pile of money, would be thrown before wild animals or dragons on their own, only to satisfy the sadistic tastes of their customers.

That was why the gladiators – every one of them – strove to hone their skills, and also tried to appeal to the audience with flashy personalities in order to survive. Some decorated their body with gaudy armours, some made a show out of dragging out their opponent’s heart after their demise, while others inked their bodies with mysterious tattoos.

As for Shique, he dramatically claimed to be ‘a descendant of an ancient royal dynasty’.

“This time, go against me, Orba. I’ll teach you what it is to fight for real.”

“Not interested.”

“Haha, are you afraid of me?”

“Oh, I am. I’m scared. So, get lost.”

“You bastard!”

As Orba continued eating his meal in his usual stooped behaviour, Gilliam pushed him in the back.

"Stop it!" Gowen commanded.

If there was a disturbance, the soldiers belonging to the gladiatorial group would rush in, so for the time being Gilliam took his leave with a reddened face.

"Come to think of it, some strange newcomers have appeared," Gowen said, after some time had passed, as if he suddenly remembered. It looked like he was talking about the ones Orba had seen too, trailing behind Tarkas back then.

"Strange? Like, with horns in their hair, and the bulge of a tail in the back of their pants?" a sword slave named Kain interfered.

He was a boy, the same age as Orba, who came to the detention facility a year ago and took after him. He wasn't that great physically or with a sword, but he excelled in dexterity, especially when handling handguns or rifles.

"Or maybe a survivor from the Ryuujin[3] Tribe, doesn't that sound romantic?"

"Ryuujin, Geblin, or whatever type of person appears now, I probably wouldn't even be surprised. This is a sword slave company after all, a trading place for all kinds of races."

"It's a much simpler story. I heard every last one of those guys hardly have any skill at the sword."

"What…?"

Kain looked stretched out his arms, seemingly uninterested.

"I mostly can't believe Tarkas would have bought a bunch of good-for-nothings without a grumpy face. But he seemed in an unusually good mood."

"Oh?"

"Certainly. For a master like Tarkas, whose eyes are always dazzled by the shine of gold, it sounds really strange, right?"

"Good mood? That guy?" Orba said, remembering the situation with Tarkas during the day.

[3] Dragon people.

"I've known him longer than you. The only times I've seen Tarkas in a good mood was when he got the chance to earn a huge amount of money."

"Then again, I wonder if it's nobles who came to visit. About an exhibition match, or something like that. Those newcomers could've also been nobles who were asking to be bought. Or maybe they're political offenders who opposed the Mephius Empire. Could there be a request for them to be gruesomely fed to dragons in public?"

"There's a strange intensity to your words, because I can't read your face."

"Anyway, where's the new book? It's been three months since I've asked for it."

Losing interest in the conversation, Orba inquired about something else. The other guys had all started raising different topics among themselves. By tomorrow, they were likely to fight as opponents even if they were gladiators working for the same firm. The idea of deepening a friendship more than necessary had never been in Orba's mind from the start.

"Ahh, it's been purchased. It'll be here tomorrow. However… although it seems a little late to say this, you're a bit unusual too. Of the guys here, even those that can read and write letters, I doubt they've ever read more than a hundred in their life."

Plucking at a skin of chicken, Gowen glanced over at Orba.

"Sometimes, even I'm almost driven with the impulse to tear off that mask. What's the true face that lies underneath? There are times I think you're only a young wild brat, and there are times the cool-headedness of a man who has survived many battlefields peeks through. Yesterday was like that. You took the appropriate actions against a Sozos without flinching."

"Are you praising me or not?"

"I'm praising you. Other than taking up a sword and fighting for yourself, you calmly consider the circumstances. Although I think you may actually be better suited as a leader, if not for that quick temper of yours. You like books about history and people, get absorbed reading them late into the night, and swallow their knowledge."

When meeting him for the first time, basically from the time he was bought by the Tarkas company, Orba's face had been covered by a mask. Ever since then, he hadn't taken it off even once. Of course, everybody wanted to know why. They wanted to see his face. They wondered about his origins.

In the beginning, it worried Gowen that Orba met fists with them in response to their curiosity and suspicions. But when half a year had passed, he thought of the makeshift excuse that 'a magician put a curse on it' and after a year the teasing stopped, and soon nobody asked him about it anymore. Although some newcomers occasionally asked him about it, Orba was able to turn a blind eye.

"What do you gain from reading a book? At least, at the place where I was born and raised, you didn't gain respect no matter how many books you owned."

"It sounds like you've been raised by ape men or Geblin."

"Watch your language, Orba. I think I'm especially kind to you considering the circumstances. If it doesn't matter to you, I too can adopt that same attitude."

Behaving like a man who couldn't understand a joke was one of Gowen's beloved habits. Orba revealed a stifled smile, but the deep-wrinkled sword-slave training official unexpectedly gave a serious look.

"As a sword-slave, normally, you only try your best to survive for the day. Some go back out into this corrupted world, but, because they can't live without committing yet another crime, there are some people who are content being a sword-slave for the rest of their life, – although, for most, their 'whole life' would probably be very short – but, you're different. You, at least, do not get absorbed in the killing and focus on the future. After that, I always think: Hey, what should I say to such a man? Should I tell him to throw away a future like that? When it's only hard, even if you hold onto it with such devotion? Or should I tell him to seriously hold on to that hope? Because it will be the strength for him to live this through?"

"Did you secretly drink some alcohol, gramps? You're talkative."

"I'm being serious."

Gowen stubbornly shook his head. Orba decided he had truly gotten drunk. Usually, Gowen wouldn't have remained silent after being called 'gramps'.

"Who is it that you fight for? The other sword-slaves, yourself, or do you have some other goal in mind?"

"I don't know."

Scuffing his words like a boy, Orba turned away his face. He didn't want his inner feelings to be seen, where he was trembling like a child.

Finishing his meal, Orba quickly left the dining hall. Although the sword-slaves could walk about freely, there was nothing but the dining hall and the bedrooms at the detention camp. It was called a bedroom, but it wasn't much different from a stable to keep livestock. As he lay down in a corner, Orba stared at his own hands.

It had been two years since then. Even today, he could remember it so well. And if he hadn't confirmed it himself, those 'two years' would've been no more than a number. For two years, Orba had barely stayed alive, surrounded by the smell of blood, guts, and iron.

However, he killed, survived, did it all over again, and what was the point in all of that?

Orba turned over on the floor. He had already grown accustomed to the feel of his hard mask touching the ground. It was as Tarkas said. Even if he was freed from being a slave, he didn't know more of how to live the 'clever' way of life, but it seemed that Gowen had misunderstood something – he was not waiting with hopes for a future like that. Supposing he did…

Under the thin shadow formed by fangs, Orba tightly gnashed his teeth.

If I do live through this, then what do I do?

It was decided. He was tired of doing things over and over in the arena, the massacres, the blood, the fights, killing each other. On the way back, he was never able to think of things like 'it's okay' or 'it'll get easier'.

An inexplicable anger was stuck in the glitter of his eyes, on the other side of the mask.

I'll get it back. I'll take it back. And for the ones who took it away from me, even though it is not enough, I will have them fully taste the pain of the agonizing cries from all the people I've killed these past two years.

Part 3

"So you were here, Orba."

Roan suddenly showed his face.

Orba, who had been looking up at the night sky, rudely averted his eyes. As a punishment for neglecting to take care of the animals and play instead, his mother

had taken away his supper, and now he was just outside the barn, sulking on his own. His face, as well as both knees he buried his face in, was full of scratches.

“Did you have another fight?”

“Not really.”

The quick-tempered Orba often quarrelled with the other children in the neighbourhood. Swinging around a wooden sword, he even went as far as the neighbouring village to pick fights. The villagers that caught sight of his figure, almost falling forward as he raced through the fields, half-jokingly said,

“Oh, Orba’s doing his best again,” as they waved their hands and watched over him. Of course, after having his fights, his mother scolded him to no end.

“Why don’t you follow your brother’s example,” was what she would always say.

His older brother was able to do anything. In the old days, he looked through a single book their father brought back when coming from the city for several times, and from that alone he was able to memorize reading and writing letters by himself. He also learned how to do basic math at a very young age. Around the time he turned ten, after begging a merchant from the city to take him in as an assistant, he was also supporting his poor family’s living expenses.

Orba on the other hand, although he’d learned reading and writing letters from his older brother, was terrible at math, and above all, he didn’t know what to do with his boiling hot blood.

Almost every night, he spent sleepless hours staring at the ceiling. His blood was always screaming in the dark. After fist fights and such, the prickling pain of his injuries seemed to overflow with the hotter, more painful black blood from deeper inside, as if it would simply jump out into the open.

At those times, he’d jump to his feet and go outside. And he’d pick up his wooden sword that was leaning against the barn. No matter how many times it had been confiscated by his mother, he always made a new one from scratch. It wasn’t uncommon, either, for him to swing around his sword until the break of dawn.

“It’s okay if you get into fights,” Roan said, sitting down next to Orba. “But you have to help mother out properly. Working as a single woman is very hard. You know that too, right?”

Along the southern border of the Mephius Empire, was a place commonly known as Drought Valley. While a valley where the river had dried up was quite common

terrain in Mephius, this poor village in barren lands, whose name was not even written down on any maps, was where Orba had grown up.

Orba didn't have many memories of his father. He passed away when he was two or three. While he'd been engaged in additional construction work for the Apta Fortress that protected the border south of the village, his father had unluckily fallen victim to a cave-in while he'd been digging through the cliff. Cutting through the valley's steep cliffs instead of creating houses or buildings was often the case in Mephius, and his father had been such a construction worker.

"Father was a man born only to dig a dark hole in the ground."

He remembered that, one day, his mother had said those words in a tone that was neither complaining nor at grief. With that said, his mother too, was a person who had no pleasure in always working hard from morning till evening, every day. She ploughed the barren fields, sold native clothes and towels she made at the City of Apta once every month, and made the nearly tasteless stew for the young brothers every day without ever getting tired of it.

Orba too, also passed through life without change or colour, but his only pleasure was when his brother came back home for a break, two or three times a month, and brought along many different books.

Books written about the Old World where humankind once left its nest, books about Magic King Zodias, and, above all, historical novels with colourful illustrations or heroic stories, got Orba fully absorbed into them. Brave heroes swinging their swords to rescue a country full of dangers, beautiful maidens in thin clothes that were imprisoned in tall towers, vicious dragons revived from ancient ruins — things he'd never experience in a lifetime and the many dazzling adventures in those worlds made Orba engrossed, and whenever he closed a book, being back in that small, miserable reality surrounding him only made him despair.

He longed for the olden days, like the age where longsword-wielding barbarians were once kings. But the truth was, from the moment he was born, it was decided Orba would live his life sipping muddy waters, and if he wanted to do more in the future, it would be be much more difficult than bringing the dead back to life.

"You know, aniki[4]," Orba said, burying his head between his arm-wrapped knees. "I feel like doing something more."

"You're not even ten years old, are you? Worrying about such things doesn't suit you."

[4] Familiar/honorific way of saying 'older brother'.

"I'm being serious. Look at all the adults here. Even I'll become like that within another few years. Day after day, you work and work, but life won't get any easier. I'll marry someone sooner or later, a child gets born, and if the child's an 'unruly boy' like me, one day he'll surely say he wants to go to the city, be a soldier for Mephius, or ride a Garberan airship, and I'll say something like, 'Oh, in the old days, your father also held onto dreams like that', and then I'll probably laugh along with the other adults while drinking my tea."

"Everyone's like that," Roan laughed, bathing in the pale moonlight.

Around this time, you could always hear singing voices coming from the house on the other side of the road. Listening to the cheerful voices of men who got drunk, although he wasn't really paying attention, he said,

"Nobody knows what kind of person he'll be. There are people who can't live without working hard every day, people who sail over violent waves by boat, old philosophers who've buried themselves in thousand-year-old books, priests of Badyne who will preach their truth to numerous believers, many renowned generals who soar through the skies in dragonstone ships, and even country leaders who've subdued many territories at their feet. What they do in a day may be surprisingly different, whether they soak their swords with blood, drown in the letters of the alphabet, or even chant the name of God, but I think even they can't provide you with an answer."

"They don't ever think about our living conditions. Even the king, who's surrounded by luxuries I wouldn't have the money for within a lifetime, and stuffing his stomach with delicious food every night. He sometimes takes a large army on a campaign, or gets shocked by betrayal, but every day he's alive. I can't even think of living such a life. I'll never be able to. Neither the king nor the nobles, can even imagine what's inside our dreams. Those people… Yes, take this night for example, they don't even consider themselves to be looking up at the same moon as I am."

"I wonder. It could be that, exactly because the king spends every day like that, he may sometimes feel a yearning to spending his life out in town. Maybe, to get away from the constraining life in the imperial court, he wants to go out to a sour-smelling bar sometimes and drown in cheap wine, listening to ridiculous stories, disgusted that, every day, he cannot relax his guard, not even for blood relatives. And he'll probably think, 'Ahh, wouldn't it be easy to just go through life breaking a sweat', with no more worries about being targeted?'"

"That's just a delusion. You mean he's yearning for a life like ours? Just because he doesn't know the difficulties and insecurities of such a life, he'll only think of it on a whim."

"Exactly. Isn't that what I said? There isn't a human being anywhere who understands everything, knows what he really wants, or knows who he truly is. I think everybody longs for what they don't know, what they have not experienced, and they're also looking for wherever there their true course may lie. In this sense, they're no different from us."

"I don't know. Then, you mean even the king, even the great priest, is someone who's not completely satisfied?"

But when his brother was about to answer,

"Why are you talking about such difficult things?"

Suddenly Alice appeared, swaying her dark brown hair slightly. It was then that they noticed the singing voices from the house across had completely stopped. It looked like the girl had finally come to put them to sleep.

While she seemed to have overheard just a little, Alice showed a dimpled smile,

"In the end, it's nothing but pointless stuff. In this world, no matter where you're from, first of all, Orba, you have to start by taking care of your mother and work earnestly, so that you can get to eat tomorrow."

"Hear that, aniki? When they're not interested in the conversation, women immediately find it difficult, insignificant, or have more important things to do."

"That, too, is the truth," Roan laughed merrily.

Alice was two years younger than his brother and three years older than Orba. And when Orba was even younger, they played as if Alice was a sister among the three.

Soon after, they enjoyed talking about memories of those days. When, by Alice's suggestion, they went fishing at the river, and that same Alice nearly drowned as she slipped on the rocks. Or the time they went to see the caravan's horses as it arrived at their village, and Orba got into trouble secretly trying to mount one, causing it to go berserk. Or when, because a boy from the nearby village said he 'saw a wild dragon', the three went to the rumoured place and got completely lost on the canyon's intricate path. Although they finally did come home late, all three had to suffer though a good scolding…

"Anyway, wasn't it because Doug from that village deceived us? Ever since that time, you've had a bad relationship, right? Even your opponent from today's fight……"

"Shut it."

The nail hitting him right on the head, Orba turned away his face. Although the reason he picked a fight with Doug was all because of Alice, he never spoke of it.

However, as they laughed and reminisced together like that for the entire evening, it was the last time he spoke with his brother in peace.

In those days, the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius and the Kingdom of Garbera were already at war with each other. It was said the Garberan cavalry recently crossed their border, although the two countries had a history of repeated conflict for some time, concerning the very definition of that border. The southern Apta Fortress, which was close to Orba's village, had also suffered from attacks by Garbera's mounted troops on many occasions.

Eventually, Garbera temporarily gave up on capturing Apta Fortress, and aimed for striking them by another route. And that was by setting up a trap. Targeting them when the majority of the troops stationed in Apta had been pulled back to the imperial capital, they immediately drove them into a siege.

Naturally, Apta Fortress was forced to a desperate, defensive battle. As it soon turned into holding out until the reinforcements came from the imperial capital, the Mephian army forcibly commandeered soldiers from the surrounding villages. And Orba's older brother Roan was also one of them.

Of course, his mother screamed, crying. If there was only one hope his mother worked for within her nearly colourless life, it was probably his brother. Although she clung onto the soldier that tried to take away his brother, Roan gently placed a hand on her shoulder and said,

"It's okay. Help will come from the imperial capital soon enough, so be patient until then."

Besides, the pay was much better than that of a merchant's assistant, he added with a laugh.

Orba, standing next to Alice, was seeing him off, watching the backs of several of the village's youths crossing over the layers of rock.

If I were just a little bigger, Orba thought. *I could go to the fortress instead of my brother. Then, mother would not have to be so sad either, and I may even receive a distinguished service among the soldiers.*

After his brother disappeared, his mother, who had always been so devoted to work, spent almost entire days in prayer, as if something inside her completely snapped. Although she sometimes remembered to stand in the kitchen and prepare a meal, when it came to the menu, she acted as if his brother Roan was about to return from the city, making only his favourite food. But when she recalled that he wouldn't be at the dining table after all, his mother threw it all away in the backyard.

Meanwhile, Orba ploughed the neglected fields, and also took care of their few animals on his own. During the evenings, Orba would climb up a narrow road carved into the cliffs and always stare at the direction of the imperial capital, looking for rows of gorgeous armours, vast dust clouds from military dragons during their march, and the majestic figures of dragonstone battleships – but he never saw the sight he was hoping for.

And, when about three weeks had passed since his brother left, residents from a village beyond the valley, which was closer to the fortress than theirs, were bounding in, out of breath.

"The fortress has fallen!"

They came with the worst news.

Apta Fortress had fallen before the approaching Garbera forces. They said the commanders and main staff who guarded the fortress had started on the escape, leaving their soldiers behind. There were no reinforcements from the imperial capital at Apta, for they'd been sent to the natural stronghold of Birac, next to the ravine further to the north. So it seemed the imperial capital had already decided that that would be heart of the southern border's line of defence. Apta had only been used to buy time.

And, concerning the land in between, the Garberan forces that were camped at the fortress, started ravaging the surrounding villages. There were acts of plunder and assault – raiding, so to speak.

The people of the village were in a hurry to gather their few belongings, although there was hardly any food with the harvest being near and they were limited to holding their own crops, and left the village in a rush. Those who had acquaintances in the vicinity hurried over there, while the people who did not, took a temporary refuge in the valley, until the Garberan soldiers left their village.

Obviously, Orba followed them, but in the midst of his escape, he noticed that his mother wasn't around.

Startled out of his wits, Orba turned back to the village. Beyond the rocks towering over the area like hills, he could see the complete panorama of his village sinking behind the evening mists. Surely, she was still there. She was waiting for his brother to come back. For his brother, who may possibly never come back again.

"Orba, where are you going? Orba!"

As Alice's voice called out behind him, he pushed the crowd aside and headed back in a hurry.

And when he managed to arrive at his destination, there wasn't a single soul, the village had become as silent as death. Because he was familiar with the scenery, there was an eeriness as if he had wandered into another dimension instead.

From the other side of the valley, he could see a group of men and horses approaching, and Orba ran towards his house in a hurry. When he opened the back door, his mother was there. She was trying to prepare a meal as usual.

"Roan?" his mother said, turning around, but when her eyes fixed on Orba's sweaty figure, she, miraculously, shrugged her shoulders. "Were you still playing, Orba? Just help me out a little, your brother will be coming home soon."

Outside, sounds could slightly be heard of the voices of soldiers, chasing the animals that were left behind. Afraid of the smoke rising up, he hurriedly tried to stop his mother. However,

"What's this, there's nothing!"

"What a measly village. Even though those guys at Gascon had it better. It seemed they slept with all of the girls."

"Isn't there at least any alcohol? Go and look!"

As soon as he thought he heard those voices coming closer, the door was violently kicked down.

Three soldiers came in noisily, each of them equipped with a simple chainmail, lance, and sword. On their faces, blackened by dust clouds, only the eyes casted a unique white light.

"Oh, there's a woman!"

"What, isn't she too old? Besides, isn't there any alcohol? Or something to eat?"

After staring at his mother, who was protectively holding the crouched Orba in her hands, they started vandalizing the house, doing as they pleased. Orba was crouching down completely, concealing his breath like a herbivore trying not to attract the attention of wild beasts.

When the Garberan soldiers smashed through the door, his eyes had caught sight of the wooden sword, which had been resting against it, rolling over the floor. But in the end, it was nothing more than a child's toy. He hated being told that more than anything, and was more than eager to stare back at those kind of people, but now he understood it painfully.

Then, as the soldiers were ransacking through to the shelves, they grabbed the crude ceramic tableware from inside and carelessly tossed them aside. Making a loud sound, the broken pieces scattered over the floor. It took Orba by surprise, as they were the things his brother Roan used, and his mother, who had been submissive until now, rose up with such force that Orba got pushed aside. From there, she started clinging onto one of the soldiers' back.

"Hey, what? What?"

"It looks like she wants to play with me!"

A red-faced soldier unwrapped his mother, turned her around, and pushed her down in place. He placed his hand in front of her mouth when she tried to raise a piercing cry, then took out a pointed knife hidden inside his chainmail, and thrust it before his mother's pale face.

"Stop it, you'd take any woman, wouldn't you?"

"The taste of a young lass is nice, but an old flower like her ain't bad either."

As he spoke his red face showed a vulgar smile, and the thread holding Orba's tensed up feelings snapped. Raising an awkward cry, he charged in. It was a desperate assault, however, and he was easily blown back by a single arm.

Knocking the back of his head against the shelves, although stunned for a moment, Orba gnashed his teeth and immediately faced forward again. And, from the top of the shelf, there was something that fell down with a loud crash. It was something long and narrow wrapped in a bundle and, with the front part of it torn, it was emitting a silver shine before Orba's eyes.

This is…

Hiding it by reflex, Orba hurriedly tore apart the bundle. As he'd expected, it was a shortsword about sixty centimetres long. The round pommel had Mephian-made characteristics. Matching its slender blade, the handle was also a little thin, fitting nicely into a child's hand.

As he took a hold of it, several letters carved into the blade jumped into his eyes.

O, R, B, A...

It was only for an instant – with his mother's screams, the sound of the red-faced soldier disorderedly throwing off his chainmail, and the noise of the soldiers laying waste to the house. Although the frightening surge of black blood boiled in his body, he drove it far away and, in that instant, the thoughts squeezed together guided him to an explanation.

The blade was engraved only with 'Orba'. Of course, he hadn't known such a thing was in his house. He didn't think his mother or other acquaintances would've especially prepared it for him. For all he knew, couldn't this be anything but a present from his brother Roan?

But Roan should've handed over the money he got for his services to his mother. Besides, a blade like this could not be purchased in ordinary towns. Most likely, after going to Apta Fortress, he got provided with weapons as a soldier, and he'd asked the blacksmith stationed at the fort to engrave his name.

And then, he left it with the caravan that went circled the fortress and the towns. But when it arrived at his house, his mother must have accepted it. Thinking, afterwards, that it shouldn't be crossed over into Orba's hands, she most likely intended to keep it from her son's sight. She probably thought that it was too dangerous for Orba, or maybe she was afraid that Orba would go away like Roan if he had a sword in hand.

At any rate…

"Hey, what's that you're holding?" a soldier called out from Orba's crouched back. "It looks like you're holding something valuable. Hey, why don't you show me?"

"This is mine!"

"That's not for you decide, but for me. Now, give it here."

The soldier ridiculing Orba put a hand on his shoulder trying to get him out of the way with force. It was more than enough.

That's right, Orba, he responded to his own inner voice.

"I said, show me — gyahh!"

Turning around, Orba swung his sword downward. With blood spraying from the man's shoulder, Orba slipped under the staggered soldier's arm and raced towards the man who was bent over his mother.

The red-faced man tore his eyes away from his mother and jumped back. Quickly picking up his hand-axe, he then received Orba's blow that was coming at him. Orba stood firm on both his legs and somehow tried to get his sword through, but still, the blade was short, and a child's strength couldn't push a hand-axe aside like that. However, instead of easily getting overmatched, Orba made himself fall to the side.

"That brat…"

He swung down another blow with murderous intent. Orba rolled over to the side. After doing one rotation, the axe's edge bit down there, right in front of his eyes. In that very instant, his blood froze up,

"Stop!"

His mother was clinging onto the red-faced man's feet. Flying into a rage, the man kicked at her hands, turned around, and raised his axe even higher. When Orba saw it, the tension of his black blood – the anxiety, irritation, rage and other various emotions that had simmering in the boy's body for such a long time – was about to be released from one single point, as if it had only now taken its final shape.

He stood up. Holding his sword with both hands, he forced it under his arm and slammed it, along with the rest of his body, into the soldier's defenceless back.

The man's back, as he'd taken off his armour, first received the blade considerably easy. Then there was a little firm resistance, but it also went through smoothly as Orba's pushed it through with both hands, until, in the blink of an eye, the point of his sword finally pierced through the man's chest.

Because Orba was also being dragged while the red-faced man staggered, he hurriedly let go of the sword. The man clashed with his back against the wall. After turning around to face the triumphant Orba, he made his mouth flap open and close, probably trying to say some sort of grudge, and threw up a huge amount of blood as he sank to the floor, until his bright red tongue drooped out and he no longer moved.

"You bastard!" the soldier who had his shoulder cut shouted, grimacing in pain.

"You killed Douga. You lowly brat."

The other also shouted in a loud voice, and came rushing over at Orba. No longer holding a sword, Orba received a full body blow and rolled over on the floor again. He got kicked in the stomach, and stepped on his back.

“Mother and child both, I’ll hang your heads under the eaves.”

Crawling on all fours, the tip of the sword was thrust before the nape of Orba’s neck. His mother too, was lifted up, twisted by the hand, and placed in the same position next to Orba. No matter how much he wrested his body with all his strength, he couldn’t get rid of the weight of the man standing on his back.

“Let me go!”

“Ahh, right away. After you’ve turned into a corpse, that is!”

Orba, raising a bestial cry, was suddenly hovering in the moment that came between life and death. With a whishing sound of wind being cut as it was brought straight down. Finally, he shouted out his brother Roan’s name, when,

“What’s going on?”

Suddenly, the wind-cutting sound ceased. Orba, scrambled thoughts mulling in his head, realized it wasn’t his brother who’d appeared though.

The one who had newly come inside the house, was a Garberan soldier after all. However, unlike the soldiers that had broken in, he was armed all over his body, with not a single part untouched, and his armour too was shining in silver. He still had a young face.

For a short time the soldiers could be seen flinching from the intruder, but then,

“It is as you can see, Knight Apprentice Sir.”

“We’ve come to receive our fair reward after winning the battle. Just because you stood in distinguished service for a while, you’re clad as a knight after all, surely you haven’t come to stop such unrefined things like these, right?” the two explained grimly.

Feigning a courteous manner, there was clearly an air that they were making light of the man.

“Besides, look. Our comrade was killed. There’s no way soldiers with Garberan pride can let this go by without getting vengeance, right?”

The soldier who spoke tipped Orba's body over at his foot, and established the sword's aim with his other hand. What Orba's eyes saw as he looked up at the ceiling, was the point of the sword, but then a single string of light came flashing from the side.

"What are you doing!"

"How pitiable. Vengeance, is it? You mean to say there's any pride in that against a child?"

The armoured youth had drawn his sword. It seemed like the man had felled that one soldier, for Orba realized the sword that should've pierced through his heart had somehow been repelled the to the side. The other roared something in a hoarse voice nearby. It sounded like he'd called out the armoured man's name, but Orba didn't catch it at the time.

"Y-Your comrade… how dare you, bastard!"

"I don't want to be called a comrade or such by inferior people like you."

As he thrust out the blooded tip of his sword, the soldier stepped back.

"Inferior, you say? Even though you've got the same history. Just because you were blessed with the opportunity to make a distinguished service, you get carried away. Always chanting, knight, knight as if it's your favourite word, but did you become a real knight? You don't share a bloodline with the Garberan royal family, you'll be an 'apprentice' your whole life. Know your place!"

Soon, the solider who seemed to be stepping back, quickly pulled something out from behind his back and brought it in front of him. It was a crossbow, fixed with a long and slender pedestal, and he released the trigger.

That instant, the armoured youth nimbly turned aside. Making a single spin, as if dancing, he narrowly avoided the arrow and decapitated the soldier's head. There wasn't the slightest hesitation. The decapitated head whirled through the air, struck the house's wall and rolled over the floor.

"Garbera is a country of knights. Instead of further defiling its name, receive the honour of being killed in action."

His handsome looks, his way of fighting, and those words he murmured – it was all as if a hero had emerged from the books Orba read all the time.

"Commander, what's the commotion!?"

A voice was raised from the outside, but he replied with “It’s nothing,” as he wiped the blood from his sword.

“You’re a child of Mephius?”

Orba didn’t immediately know what was a good answer to the question raised. It was not that he was especially conscious of the name of the country called Mephius, either. The people of Orba’s village, generally living in a world of only about ten kilometres surrounding the village, weren’t very interested in the country or its territorial disputes.

The man gave Orba a thin smile when he gave no answer, and glanced over at the soldier who’d sunk in a puddle of blood. Orba, his body suddenly freezing up, tightly held onto his mother’s shoulders. He started looking if there was any weapon within reach, when,

“Hurry and get away from here,” the young man said. “It was to protect your mother – right? You truly hold the spirit of a knight inside of you. Much more than the people of Garbera, who seem to have forgotten all about the knight’s way. Now, you may get out of here. I’ll try to stop the plunder and assaults as much as possible, but I can’t catch a hold on all of them.”

Those eyes, for some reason, resembled those of his brother Roan. Supporting the shoulder of his sobbing mother, Orba slowly faced the back door, then, pulling his mother by the hand, he ran away at full speed. A wintry wind blowing through the streets after sunset, struck his cheeks. Urging his mother, who kept muttering ‘Roan, Roan’, sometimes even shouting at her, they finally united with Alice and the village people after an hour.

After that, they followed behind Alice’s father and headed for a village that was fifteen kilometres upriver to the north.

Orba didn’t know if the young armoured man had been true to his words, but at least from there on the random plundering was no longer carried out around Apta, which later became the territory of Garbera.

However, the flames were still approaching the village that Orba and the rest had succeeded in running away to earlier.

There were hardly any signs. Suddenly, ‘they’ came at them in full force and immediately started plundering. They were men who were completely harnessed in

black. Provisions, clothes, and of course money and goods, all the things of possible value were taken by force. The people, too, were no exception. As soon as they arrived at the village they took the women, and impaled any man who tried to resist with spears from atop their horses, decapitated their heads with swords, and exposed them to gunfire.

Amidst all of the confusion, Orba lost sight of his mother. Just when he stumbled forward with impatience and fright,

"Alice!"

He spotted Alice getting bound by a soldier with her arms behind her back. Even though she was about to be dragged away, Alice was still screaming at him to run away. Completely losing himself, Orba leapt forward. The feeling of killing that one person still remained in his hands. And now he'd decided to do the same thing. He reached out his hand for the sword the soldier was carrying.

But, the moment he took a hold of the handle, he received a strong blow to the back of his head. The sight flickered before his eyes, and his consciousness was soon about to fade. Just before it did, he had a feeling he heard Alice's voice calling out his name.

When he came to, Orba was lying on his back, spread-eagled, on the ground. His head was throbbing painfully. His consciousness was still a little dim, and he wasn't even sure if he was dreaming or not.

"General Oubary , what do you want to do?"

He didn't know how much time had passed when he heard that voice. Amongst the screams of men and women nearby, and firing in the distance, Orba secretly peeked through half-opened eyes at the one who had been called out to earlier.

It was a man atop a horse, holding a bottle of liquor which he'd most likely stolen. He was lightly and stylishly dressed in armour, bald, and had the majestic air of a giant. Even though he had such an serious appearance, there was violet lipstick on his thin lips, giving the elevated, sneering figure a strange kind of look.

"If all the valuables are gone, set fire to the lot. Leave not a single grain of wheat behind for Garbera."

Saying those words, the man called general threw away his bottle of wine. It splashed against Orba's cheeks.

"Very well, this village was burned by Garbera. Let the soldiers be thorough. They can have the women, but kill them when they're done with them. Don't even sell them off. You will supervise."

Shortly after that, the screams and shouts died out. Instead, a hot wind roasted his skin, and an acrid stench started filling the air. When he finally managed to stand up, his surroundings had turned into a sea of flames.

There wasn't a single person left alive. Orba roamed about the village, calling his mother and Alice's name in a loud voice, while brushing away sparks of fire at his hands. But the only things that came into his sight were the slaughtered bodies of the village people. The bodies of the elderly, women, and children.

That Oubary…

With the place scorched all over, Orba's whole body had become dark red with the blood and soot falling from overhead.

Isn't that Oubary… Apta Fortress's…

He remembered hearing about it. When the fortress had urgently been recruiting soldiers, he was sure the military men that appeared in the village had spoken the name. He was the veteran general who had been entrusted with the protection of the fort.

So that meant this had been the Mephian army. After the fortress fell, the troops including Oubary went north, ahead of Garbera's pursuing troops, and burned down the village where Orba and the others had escaped to earlier. And they'd taken all spoils of wars before going back to the capital, so that Garbera couldn't make use of it.

I'll kill them, Orba vowed.

Mustering up the strength from somewhere in his body, although there had not even been one drop left behind earlier, the power that kept him going forward, it came from his unrelenting vow with the intent to kill.

Although he had no clear answers on whether to kill Oubary, the Garberan soldiers, or the Emperor, and on how to achieve those ends, for now, he just kept on walking.

Chapter 2 – Two Boys

Part 1

After that, having slipped into the Mephian territory of Birac, Orba repeatedly stole. He had no hesitation or any difficulties with it. Running around barefoot on the ground day after day, he headed over to another area just before the surrounding people and guardsmen memorized his face, doing the same thing over and over until he, once more, headed for his next location.

He started hanging out with boys of the same age who had the same circumstances. Together, they usually sold stuff they'd gathered from dump sites or stuff they'd stolen at the side of the road, sometimes snitching purses with a single wield of the knife, or threatening wealthy-looking merchants coming out of bars, plucking them of their money.

While spending his days like that, one time, something happened that caused several people to get seriously injured amongst the same-age group Orba was hanging out with. Apparently, they'd been challenged by boys from another group. The children were having a children's turf war. And as always, it was accompanied by force.

Everything was taken from them. Everything – meaning, they already had such a minimal lifeline where they barely managed to live another day, but if they were cut off like this, basically all of their members would be left for dead.

"We'll either die, or fight and die. But those who want to do more and win, follow me!"

Orba gave those children who were about to become fainthearted a pep talk. He didn't want to have everything snatched away from him twice. Gathering up the remaining members of their small group, Orba retaliated against a group of opponents that was much bigger in number.

However, he didn't attack them straight ahead. He thoroughly gathered intelligence on the rival group beforehand. So, when the timing was right and they had the least number of opponents in place, they carried out their attacks.

What Orba valued above all was information. He always had to have the latest information, understanding both friend or foe, singling out the enemy's numbers, strength, movements, and other things like that.

This is what separates adults and children.

It was the only thing Orba thought. A child who knows nothing only gets robbed without even knowing who the enemy is. But if you distinguish friend and foe on your own, and if you know your enemies, you can become the adult on the robbing side.

When Orba was fourteen, he'd become the leading figure among the boys his age. At first, the group he was acquainted with numbered only about ten, but, increasing with each passing day, it finally expanded to more than a hundred members.

However, the black blood that boiled inside of Orba never cleared away. There were hundreds of verbal disputes as well, where he certainly was the kind of person to use physical strength and mostly settled things quickly with his fists. At the same time, though, rather than spending the nights with his friends drinking alcohol, making a racket, getting in high spirits, and chattering, he was also the type to keep to his own, prop up his knees in a dim corner of the room, and be lost in thought.

Therefore, Orba, who liked to spend the night alone, made some spare time for reading. When immersed in the world of books, he was sometimes reminded of his older brother Roan, thought of Alice, or worried about his mother's whereabouts.

For how long should he be conserving his strength? First of all, could he call upon that strength when fighting his 'enemies'? And how many nights more would these thoughts circle around in his head? There was no end to the insecurities and self-questioning. Nonetheless, Orba still held that time of worry dear to him, because it allowed him to keep pushing forward.

It was about four years after coming to Birac.

That day was supposed to be just another ordinary day. Ordinary being extremely busy, counting the profits in the safe from the illegal gambling house he was running, before preparing his meet with influential gun-smuggling merchants in the alleys of Birac, training with sword and gun for about one hour, and revising his plan to attack a merchant ship with several of his best men, which was to be carried out within the week.

The plan at the end of the week was a large scale one. They intended to make a surprise attack on one of the air carriers – formally called dragonstone ships – that was fully loaded with gold bars and goods slated to be delivered to the district west of the city-state, by ambushing it in the ravine located twelve kilometres southwest of Birac. They had three single-seared airships prepared on their side. Several platoon leaders, including Orba, were already assigned with flying practice.

However, because it was such a large-scale operation, no matter how much the boys agreed on the method, there were big holes as well.

Several boys of the former rival group, envying Orba's success, had slipped into their group as spies, and had leaked several details about their plan to the Birac garrison.

The second floor of the bar they used as a hideout in those days, was attacked by surprise, and Orba found himself surrounded by the city guards. He didn't have any weapons at hand to fight back and all the escape routes were blocked. The moment he was struck by their ropes, having again become a person deprived of status, Orba bit his lips causing blood to trickle.

Bastards.

Still trying to resist as his face and body suffered at the guards' fists, Orba again felt the swell of dark blood inside of him.

Shit, shit, shit! It's not over. I'm still alive. Mephius or Garbera, I won't be killed easily, not even by these people. I will live. Live by all means.

He was put in prison for possession of a large amount of illegal weaponry, and obviously for planning to attack a merchant ship, and one crime after another, such as repeated gang robbery and illegal gambling, was further uncovered.

The time to carry out the investigation didn't take a day. And Orba, who was once more tossed into a cramped cellar, got a hot iron pressed against his back. He was branded. A long, vertical line in the centre of an X mark, was the proof of being a slave.

He got a high fever from the pain, and that evening inside prison, when Orba was alone, writhing in agony, he experienced an even stranger fate.

"…Indeed, they're alike."

He was grabbed by the chin and felt himself being lifted. Far from able to shake it off, he didn't even have the energy to open his eyes and see the face of this person. Even without paying attention to any of his emotions, it was like his brains were on fire, simmering slowly.

"From what I heard during the interrogation, his voice is also the same."

"Even though they're alike, it has its limits. Actually, he seems to be a different person depending on the angle. If he were a little more alike, he'd have some purpose. Well, what's going to happen after this?"

"According to the place I selected, this man holds some interesting portent. With luck at your side, he'll certainly be helpful to the master any time in the future, won't he?"

"But a sword slave? If this kid's life may not be there on the morrow, how can he be of help to me? If I had known about the verdict earlier, I would've considered dealing with it differently."

"No. You certainly won't know tomorrow's fate if you invested in him, but this man should expect to become a huge talent. To put it in other words, nothing can be made of this man now. But after passing his days as a sword slave – naturally, if he doesn't get his neck reaped on the first day, or possibly die from some other cruel twist of fate – I think that he'll survive more than three years, no, two years, possibly."

"Then, I suppose I'll wait without expecting anything. At any rate, there's certainly no way this lad can become a slave with his actual face."

At that moment, Orba, being held down by the same people that had branded him earlier, suddenly felt an oppressive feeling on his face and, with just the trace of a heat like fire, Orba's skin started burning. He squirmed around, screaming, wondering if maybe it all was a dream, not even being sure whether he was really still alive or not.

The next morning, his body still tormented by the pain and fatigue, Orba was dragged and taken out of the dungeons and then tossed onto a cart where stark naked men were crowded together. The medium-sized Houban dragon, a dragon with a flat body and eight long legs, was fitted for pulling. Still within a light-headed state of mind, Orba went away from Birac being pulled by the dragon.

It was probably about two days later when the journey came to an end. They got a meal once a day, but because it was only one cup of water and some dried meat, the men, including Orba, were exhausted, doubled over, not even having the energy to start a conversation.

"This is another strange slave, huh?" a man with a tanned, muscular body said, white hair and a moustache covering his features as he peered into Orba's face. "Gladiators that are already renowned often wear such masks or helmets to promote their personal appeal, but is he really a newcomer?"

The man grasped Orba's face, and tried to pull it off. Reminded of the pain, as if his skin was getting torn, Orba immediately flung back at the arm.

"Bastard!" an armed swordsman said, about to beat Orba up, when the man used only the word "Stop!" and took control, grinning with his lips buried in his beard.

"Looks like this is no ordinary mask. According to your background, you've got an unyielding spirit. But most of the time it's merely only that of a stubborn lad who'll become nothing more than a tame dog after three days. I was appointed as a breeder who'll teach you to 'sit' and 'wait'. I'll teach you first-hand what'll happen to you if you oppose me."

With those words, the man raised a fist the size of a hammer and slammed it into his bare back. A painful grunt escaping his lips, Orba doubled over without a word.

"I am Gowen. I'd like to form a long-standing relationship. You'll be made to kill each other after ten days at the earliest. Let's hope it won't come to that."

After that, the sword slave training began, and Orba also noticed that he was wearing a mask that night. Looking at the mirror in astonishment, Orba, resenting the joke, frantically tried to tear it from his face, but it was stuck closely to his skin and he couldn't take it off, as if it had become part of the skin itself.

After one hour of wrestling, out of breath and sweating all over on his body, he punched his own strange figure reflected in the mirror.

It cracked with a shattering sound and the iron mask became a warped reflection.

How far must they go to scorn people? Giving me such a foolish mimicry, how much further must they make me fall?

I'm going to live and get out of here, by all means! I'm going to find the ones who made such a mockery of me and make them suffer through the same thing!

As he pretended not to hear the sound of his own sobs, he crumbled down on the spot.

The next day, Gowen summoned Orba before him in the practice ring and suddenly threw the sword he had in hand at his feet.

“Try to strike me any way you want.”

Orba looked at his opponent with a look that doubted his sanity. Even though Orba wasn’t thinking about trying to escape right now, at the moment Gowen was unarmed, and what’s more, considering the chains usually tied around his ankles, it was ‘only during practice’ that these chains were removed.

Orba picked up the sword, bent his back as if building up his ‘reservoir’, and rushed forward within a single breath.

It was much like a surprise attack. He acted without mercy. He aimed for the throat. He was going for the kill.

However, his arm did not reach for half the amount he’d imagined, and on top of that, he was kicked hard and fell to his knees. Standing up, he made the same move once more. It brought the same result. The moment he struck, Gowen nimbly went to his side and suppressed him by the elbow.

“You seem to have a little experience. However, that experience only gets in the way right now. Forget it,” Gowen said, after he easily dodged Orba, who tried to attack him for a third time.

Orba wasn’t used to being told things so unsympathetically. His head was seething with anger as he turned and struck, but Orba had no luck no matter how much he tried to challenge Gowen. What irritated Orba the most was that his opponent didn’t seem to take it seriously. So he cursed Gowen, provoked him, recklessly charged at him saying he’d kill him, while in truth, despite keeping a watchful eye, he couldn’t find any openings in his opponent.

“Are you trying to kill me, Orba?”

Orba’s supposedly polished self-taught style could not be called brilliant.

“But, that’s too bad. You no longer have anything. No name, no status, no clothes, nothing to eat, and you just can’t do anything about it. Yes, even your life. Slaves

don't even have the freedom over their own lives or deaths. Even if you want to get it back, you can't just repurchase it by offering more money than what you were sold for."

This one-sided training where he was only getting knocked down was equal to a hellish self-punishment, however, as the day came to an end, an ever more excruciating pain was lying in wait for Orba.

It was the mask's 'curse'. At midnight, while he was lying down exhausted, it suddenly emitted a heat like flames that burnt as if they were melting Orba's face, much in the same way as when the mask was placed on him the first time.

It was mostly in the evenings, through irregular intervals. Sometimes nothing would happen for three days straight, while at other times the heat was being emitted regularly for three days and three nights.

At those times, there was nothing Orba could do. He could only roll over the ground, drawing blood as his ankles scraped against the chains, and continue to hope that the pain would go away sooner, even if just for a second.

I'm going mad. I'm going mad, I'm going mad, I'm going mad.

As he rolled over the floor, Orba harboured that fear time and time again, and even thought to become so might only be better. However, the power to hold onto it until the end, just before his consciousness was about to be taken away by a white, splashing wave, worked out at last. Gritting his teeth, bending his back as if the bones should break, Orba endured it just to endure. Many of his fingernails broke, as he tore at the ground, and tore at his mask.

The other slaves, and the soldiers held responsible for monitoring the slaves of the Tarkas Gladiatorial Group, naturally felt revolted by his figure frothing in pain. Rumours soon spread whether it was a curse by true magic, causing Tarkas, who had bought Orba from the slave traders, to make a bitter face.

"Merchandise is merchandise. Like I care if it's magic or a curse!? Just don't ever let him die when he's not earning his pay!"

Giving those orders, Tarkas was certainly a most undaunted man. Orba was generally ignored as long as he didn't die a dog's death.

I won't die.

It was a long, long night. His flesh and bones scraped by pain and the temptation of madness, wishing to die every second, it felt like the night would never break, but

eventually it came to an end. Unless Orba himself gave up his life into the darkness, dawn would always come. Exhausted, lying down with his body already having no drop of strength left, he could feel the morning light upon his mask. Unsteadily raising his hands and taking hold of the mask, he pushed strength into his fingers and made an oath.

Unless someone stabs me in the heart, I will never let myself die.

It was as Gowen said. *My life is not mine. But it doesn't automatically belong to Tarkas either.*

My life, with all that was taken from me, is all that I have.

His heart had been beating in order to live until he'd meet his mother, Alice, and possibly his brother Roan again, his muscles only brandishing a sword to reach those who raided them, with the purpose of building a mountain of corpses.

After that, Orba was totally absorbed into his training. The sword and Orba's body soon became integrated as one. He was holding formless hatred without knowing how to clear himself of it, and different from the time when he was just full of unease. The sword gave form to his hatred. His sword became a spear of hatred that cut and tore through all doubts. Altogether put in another way, it became his desire to live.

"If you want to survive, learn the technique to kill an opponent, and at the same time, also to kill yourself. People who can't solely kill themselves, are killed by others in the end. There's no exception."

Gowen said so clearly. And Orba followed those instructions.

He killed his emotions. He burned them vigorously, roaring like a flame, day and night, so that he could also thoroughly burn himself. However, at the same time, the fire couldn't be extinguished either.

Therefore, at midnight, although lying down quietly with possibly his face scorching under the mask, Orba continued burning his secret firewood – the anger and hatred in his chest – smouldering them into glowing embers.

Before long, he received his debut match. When Orba set foot in the arena, he was welcomed by a large crowd surrounding the place.

While the sky and earth were wrapped in loud voices, Orba fought a man that had picked up a sword like him, and killed him. He didn't even remember whether his opponent was young, or if he was older than him. Only the moment he killed, and

the moment even more cheers poured onto his sweating back, was what he remembered in great detail.

"Die!" Orba yelled as he looked up at the spectators. "Fuckin' die !!"

Although the voice itself was drowned out by the cheers, Orba raised his bloody sword and continued spitting his profane language at all of them.

And, within one week's time, he was to perform his second match. It was against a bearded man holding a zigzagged short-sword. It was something of a disgrace. There might have been jeers, or they might have progressed to the name of gods. Twice, thrice, he took a blow from a violent slashing attack. Each time, Orba changed his grip on the sword. He changed the placement of his feet. He was studying how to fight in the midst of battle.

He fended off a sword that was about to attack him from his side. And his opponent's body was *opened* before his eyes.

Orba had swung his sword down right in front of him. The sword had cut into the middle of the face. Blood, bones, and brains were spilling from all sides. His hand growing numb, he hardly had any sense of touch. It was the third time he'd killed someone.

Orba became a gladiator and time went by for a little less than two years. In that time there were countless battles. There were also many endless nights spent counting all of the stars that filled up the night sky.

However, after a year passed, the curse of the iron mask heating up gradually disappeared, and after another half year passed, the periodic maddening pains became unbelievably docile. Although, it was no ordinary mask, as he still wasn't able to tear it off, not getting a dent whether he struck it with the pommel of his sword or with a hammer. On the contrary it only seemed to endanger his own life and he was simply forced to postpone his wish to take off the mask.

And — when five days passed after Orba stopped the reckless voracity of the large-sized Sozos dragon at the Ba Roux arena,

"I found out why Tarkas was so merry," Gowen suddenly said at the breakfast table. "You know Mephius and Garbera have been making peace negotiations, right? It looks like they're finally planning to put an end to the ten-year war."

"Hmm," Shique nodded. "So the crown prince of Mephius and the princess of Garbera are going to have a political marriage, huh?"

"Mephius has various etiquette concerning marriages of the imperial household. The marital vows have to be performed at Seirin Valley[5], for example, and there are also gladiatorial fights in the repertoire to be hosted. It looks like we from Tarkas Gladiatorial Group are the only ones recruited."

Kain whistled. For a little while now, he was making the repairs of a clock with dexterous hands at the table, as requested of him by Tarkas.

"Well, that means they're going to make us kill each other in front of the imperial family."

"We can pay our respects to the crown prince himself. Exciting, isn't it, Orba?" Shique said, while Orba was as usual bent forward with his eyes on his book.

"It won't change a thing. Not one. Just putting flowers on armour and sword," he replied bluntly.

Part 2

It was early after dawn when Gil Mephius returned. Leaving his horse at the stables and heading for the back gate, Gil soon recognized the figure of Simon Rodloom and got a sombre look on his face. And then, as expected, he ended up having to listen to his complaints.

"Young prince, I am not impressed. You've been tomfooling around like this every day and night."

"Your hobby of ambushing people is awful too."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to look behind him, at the friends he'd been hanging around with. They were all children of nobility – seventeen, eighteen of them – around Gil's age and just a collection of second or third sons with no claim to the family succession.

"I do not want to mimic a father impatiently waiting for his daughter's return either. However, your highness is also in the offing for the wedding with the Garberan princess. Things like this will not do. Please show some understanding."

"I know. Don't glare like that. Exactly because the wedding is at hand, I want to enjoy the freedom of being single before it's too late."

[5] Valley of Holy Descent (聖臨の谷).

"It's just that I can't cover up for you every single time."

"That's why I told you – I know!"

Gil was about to lose his temper as usual, but,

"If you truly know already, please prepare to dress yourself in due haste. His majesty is waiting at the palace gates."

"Father is?"

Blood draining his face, the angry expression was replaced by the tint of dismay. Also, Simon did not fail to notice that the prince's friends were laughing in secret.

"Well, see ya."

"Prince, at the dawn of the wedding, let's make some racket all night again."

As expected, even though their outward behaviour was very friendly, they seemed distant. While all of them had renowned noble fathers, they hung around the prince nearly every day and night. In the canyon-rich country of Mephius they had street races with rare horses, invited young women from distinguished houses to entertain at the river, gambled, imitated hunts, drank alcohol, and had meaningless wild parties.

But that's only their responsibility, Simon thought.

The nation and its soldiers were tired of the long-standing war. However, although there had finally come an end to the battles with Garbera with the political marriage folding the curtain, it wasn't what everyone had been hoping for. To make matters worse, during the peace negotiations, the southern territory of Apta that had played a central part had been divided with Mephius getting the short end of the bargain.

Sandwiched between the two countries of Mephius and Garbera, was the Duchy of Ende. It didn't have a very large territory, but the country had a long history whose lineage could be traced back to the beginning of the magic dynasty, and it also had tight connections with the gulf countries across the sea. Furthermore, because the powerful eastern nation, Arion, had a longstanding relationship due to their similar lineage, they weren't an opponent to make light of if they decided to compete for supremacy of the continent's centre.

Ende hadn't intervened in the ten-year war, but, although it continued to keep a small trading relationship with both countries, albeit separately, it had shown signs of forming a military alliance with Garbera.

As soon as the Emperor of Mephius received the information, he easily took back the vow he pledged three years ago before the divinity at the Dragon Gods temple, 'Until the neck of the Garberan king is presented before me, I will never sheathe my sword,' and suggested to make peace with Garbera.

Of course, Garbera wasn't so sure of his change of heart. But they also had some conflicts amongst themselves. If they were amply allied with Ende, it might be enough to attack Mephius anyway. However, the war had brought much damage and ruin to Garbera. Moreover, if they would increase military activities together with Ende, they also raised the concern that Ende might do with their territory however they pleased.

For Garbera, who had the same dilemma with Mephius standing at their side, the territory of Apta was brought in. In the end, as a result of weighing the different options, Garbera complied with Mephius's request for an alliance.

His imperial majesty, too, must have considered it a bitter decision.

In and out of the country, Guhl Mephius was whispered of as the 'Dragonheart Emperor'. Partly as a literal symbol of fear, but also partly as nothing more than irony.

Around the time they entered their sixth year of war with Garbera – it was at the time when the aforementioned divination was done – Guhl had arbitrarily strengthened the imperial household's influence in order to prevent confusion in the chain of command. The council, which consisted of the major aristocrats, lost half of their authority, and now it existed almost in name only.

Simon Rodloom, too, was a said member. The Rodloom House currently had no successor though, because twelve years ago, in exchange for becoming the council president, the western fortress city that made up the heart of their territory was handed over to another noble. Hence, as he currently had no territory to govern and no soldiers to command, he was a noble from a distinguished family in name only.

His situation virtually resembled that of other nobles. Aside from those who had kept their influence by being servile to the emperor for many generations, for those who were willing to hope for just a little progress in the country, the current Mephius was only a stifling place.

Simon thought he was much like the ones who'd hung around the prince earlier, having enough room for sympathy among the nobles' second sons, as they neither had a promised position nor a future to look forward to. If the war came to an end, and those who'd made a name of themselves on the battlefield were given titles, they couldn't have them acquire part of their extended territory.

Of course it was the world of belligerent countries. Although war itself might not necessarily disappear after this, with Mephius currently wrapped in a feeling of war-weariness, an opportunity would probably only arrive after five, ten, or even twenty years.

The irony of the nickname 'Dragonheart Emperor' lay in the fact that, even though he was thought of as an authoritative dictator in his homeland, recently, he hadn't been able to demonstrate his influence on foreign territories.

Although it probably fits as a symbol for the current state of Mephius,

Simon thought, not hesitating on having such opinions and showing a slight self-mockery while waiting for the crown prince to finish his preparations. Simon, who had retired from his position of council president, was now more like the prince's nursemaid.

As Gil hurriedly jumped out of his room with a change of clothing and hairstyle, he ordered Gil to walk beside him.

"You're so bossy all the time, Simon. Like a nagging courtesan."

"There's no need to get angry. Or you'll hear that tone every day when you get married."

"Why shouldn't I get angry? I won't be doing as told by a wife three years younger than me."

"Although Princess Vileena of Garbera is young, she's someone who has gone through a lot. She's also resolved to brace herself for a confrontation with the prince."

"What's that, talking as if it's some battle?"

"Married life *is* a battle. The vague line between winner and loser only gets thinner. It's also important to know information on the opponent beforehand. So, are you willing to listen to me talk now?"

Although Gil only meant to make a joke, it had stirred up a hornet's nest, and Simon, not at all caring about Gil's scowl either, started talking about tales of Princess Vileena.

It was about five years ago, when Garbera was in the midst of a rebellion. It was the work of local lords secretly in touch with Mephius. They first attacked the villa where the king's predecessor lived, and then took it over. Princess Vileena, who had come over to play, also happened to be there and they kept her hostage along with

her grandfather, the previous king. However, the princess, who was only nine years old at the time, did not shy from their rebel opponents at all, and seemed to have stood against them admirably, seeking the release of all hostages other than her.

Also, compared to other foreign countries, Garbera still vigorously mined dragonbone fossils, purifying the raw materials into the weightless metal known as dragonstone, which had become a big source of income. And, Princess Vileena was known to be an expert at flying the suddenly famous Garberan-style single-seated airships made of the very same metal.

"Certainly, she decorated the airship race that's performed in Garbera once every few years, by becoming a splendid runner-up."

"Do women ride airships?" Gil said, with a weary look. "Geez, she's passed fourteen, but she still seems like a child. In Mephius, you don't even think of women flying in the sky with such vehicles. I can't even try to imagine my wife at the palace garden, capering in the sky with an airship. People would point their finger and make a laughingstock out of me. Why would the first prince born in historic Mephius give his bride a freedom like that? I'd rather look for a natural beauty anywhere in the city! Simon, isn't it possible to cancel the marriage in some way, even now?"

He gave a nonchalant sigh, but it was Simon who wanted to sigh even louder. Should the royal prince come to graciously inherit the imperial dynasty, he'd half-heartedly give priority to his personal preferences over the nation and its people.

The prince isn't even a bad person. But what he said will only cause severe intrigue and mayhem, Simon thought inside. *And his father is a hero. Although he's lost part of the southern territories, he also had the ability to make peace with Garbera within almost five minutes, outwitting Ende.*

On the other hand, he isn't a good father.

"Father, have you called for me?"

The two had made their way over to the emperor's private room. It was still early in the hours and the hall of the imperial court was not yet open. However, the impatient Emperor Guhl, sitting at breakfast, had already decided to let many men seek audience one after another and listen to their words.

Then, before the many nobles – the people who would later become Gil's retainers – the father openly railed at his son.

"How much time has passed since I summoned you!? You still don't have any territory, not a single soldier depending on you. You don't even have a single job

assigned to you, and yet you make off like that where my eyes can't reach? But you were probably just occupied with your worthless nightlife, anyway."

"No, father, I…"

"So, the only son that I've born is a useless sloth like you. It's the most pathetic truth that our dynasty's long history will meet disaster."

Simon gazed at the prince's shivering back. Over his shoulder, he also had a view of the raving emperor's figure. Deep wrinkles formed on his face as the extent of his temper grew wilder.

"It seems like Princess Vileena is quite a courageous princess. I heard she can handle a gun and airships better than any ordinary man. You're not evenly matched. Probably the only manly achievement you've got is that you're about to marry her. Have you got the honour of killing a dragon, capture any survivors of the Ryuujin Tribe, or maybe even discovered an ancient spaceship buried in the ruins? Oh, those are feats worthy of a main character in a saga!"

The emperor pleasantly struck the table, buying the laughter of the retainers lined up around him. When several people followed suit, he added with satisfaction,

"You should be careful, or before you know it, you'll be the one wearing a dress and carried up into the bed."

What a despicable sight.

Of course, Simon did not mutter those words out loud.

Among those at table was Ineli, the eldest child of the emperor's second wife, Melissa. In front of the girl with fair skin and highly donned hair, Simon had seen that Gil became a much more easily swayed man. Although he had apparently been invited by Princess Ineli to watch the gladiators just yesterday, she also turned down her face and suppressed her laughter.

In the end, Gil hardly uttered a single word either.

"I think I also find it a bit despicable."

As soon as the emperor made his leave, Fedom Aulin spoke to Simon.

Although he was much younger than Simon, with his body covered in fat, he was also much bigger. He was the noble in charge of Birac Fortress and its surrounding area. He was also one of the sole leading members who proceeded over the peace

negotiations, and was much more promising than other lords with their deathly gazes. Simon kept an eye on him.

Although, in truth, that hardly meant he was a great man.

"You can't assume the prince can carry this country on such unreliable shoulders. Sure enough, compared to those who were fated to be born on the streets, you could call him lucky."

Solemnly shaking his head, he lowered his voice to a whisper,

"The resistance against the imperial household is growing stronger. Emperor Guhl still gathers much respect and fear because of his successes, but when it comes to Prince Gil… The way things stand, those who consider him no good may not necessarily have to come out either. No, no, however, bearing the country's future in mind, can we really just condemn them as traitors?"

It was obvious that with 'them' he meant himself. He was quite blatantly riling Simon up, trying to gauge whether or not he could become a potential ally, for there could possibly be an even greater amount of dead than there would be war casualties if Mephius lost the ten-year war against Garbera.

"The prince is young," Simon said, not showing the slightest change in expression. "Anything can still happen after this. Even when His Majesty was young, there wasn't any indication of him becoming the Dragonheart. We have to support the young prince and build the future of our nation together."

"Haha! That's so like you, Lord Simon. Your eyes are turned towards the future."

Fedom stroked his strongly slackened jaw. Simon unintentionally spilled a smile.

Well, I wonder if this man was able to understand my current honour student-like words.

Simon was certainly worried about the current state of Mephius, as it was currently impossible for the prince to do good.

However, despite such fears, everything might start to topple into an unexpected direction very soon. And Simon would not separate himself from the person concerned. Having experienced the destined changes of Prince Gil Mephius up close, it was still much better than Fedom Aulin's methods.

Part 3

What was called the Mephius Empire, boasting their power as an 'imperial dynasty', dated back to seven generations before the current emperor, Guhl Mephius.

The Domick Flats that cut diagonally through the mountains was currently all of its territory. The famous Black Tower, known as the 'Sword forged from the remains of the Space Immigrant Ship's bow', stood at its centre with the imperial capital Solon surrounding it in a circle. Among the natural stronghold formed by intricate valleys, many small forts were built that couldn't even be called castles, which in turn protected several major cities and the large and small villages dotting the area. The forts, including the city and villages surrounding it, each had a district official, while the nobles in turn usurped and commanded several of its regions.

It was evening.

Gil Mephius was making his favourite horse run at reckless speed.

To the west, the Domick Flats were glittering and shining bright red, while, to the east, the mountains and rows of cliffs towered over like a pitch-black wall, enveloping it in darkness. If he'd look up at the slope rising to his west, he would see the rocky mountains where the Mephius Family built their castle three generations ago. It took the strength of dragons and humans, and it was said they even borrowed the power of several magicians who were rare in Mephius, to carefully carve the limestone mansion. Although it had first been used as a council hall after the new castle was built, now, it was only so in name.

But Gil didn't spare those historical buildings a glance as he cantered down towards the town streets, passing the statues of Mephius's founding king and many heroes lined up in the natural corridor.

Shit!

No matter how much he tried to empty his head, his father's face, the ridiculing voices, and the figure of Ineli's downcast shoulders and shivering form kept coming back.

"About tomorrow's plans?"

Although he had asked Ineli out again at noon, she rolled her alluring eyes in a charming gesture.

"Haven't you just been scolded by father this morning? Although your boldness has indeed the quality of an emperor's, shouldn't you be a bit more prudent?"

Holding the hem of her skirt, she bowed before him. Her eyes, however, glancing his way with an upturned look, held signs of testing him out. And, as Gil was at a loss for words just like when he'd faced his father, she turned her back and left after saying, "Have a good day."

While Gil ran his horse, he gritted his teeth.

She was definitely provoking me.

That sweet look in her upturned glance. Ineli had been implicitly making a mockery of Gil.

— So, you're still afraid of your father, huh?

— A child that can do nothing but follow his father's orders can't keep me company.

— Now, why don't you hurry on back to your room and play by yourself?

Today he didn't even get a little drunk. When the day fell, the black water lily powder he'd always mix with his alcohol, although it should have instantly made him forget about all annoying things as usual, just today, it seemed to have a bad effect on him. So he nearly doubled the amount he normally knocked back. Then suddenly, after getting severely drunk, Gil wanted to take a fast ride on his horse. He didn't call for his friends. He was all by himself for today.

Gil had never received a single kind word from his father. He'd almost never seen him show a smile.

When he hadn't yet become ten, Gil had tagged along on a wild dragon hunt. At the time, as a sort of 'test of courage', he'd placed his foot on the dragon's neck, which had just been shot dead with a gun. Upon seeing his own son drawn as a painting, raising his chin with his arms crossed like a hero, Guhl said,

"Look, it's a dragon-slaying hero! My son will rise up to the heavens devouring dragons."

And he laughed, baring his white teeth.

Gil could not bring himself to stay irritated when he so cherished the memories of his childhood. On the other hand, he couldn't help it that it was the only pleasant memory he had of his father.

Father must really hate me, he thought.

It was obvious that he didn't have the makings of a hero. How many times had his father sighed during his sword training? Publicly too, like earlier today. All the retainers supported his father. The only one that stuck up for him, his mother, had died five years ago.

And, before last year, his father took the widowed Melissa from a notable family as his second wife. He got two sisters she brought from her previous marriage. Because she had not yet fully finished mourning her late husband, there were many malicious whispers about her in the palace, and, also for other reasons, Gil did not like Melissa. She was, of course, not his mother. Like the older retainers standing at father's side, in his father's eyes, she was no person to look down upon.*

And at the time, her oldest daughter Ineli too… When he imagined looking down at her figure at the time, with looks that got more strangely sensual, Gil noticeably kicked the flanks of his horse in a fit of anger.

"Oh?"

Among the people who narrowly avoided being run down by his horse, was Fedom. He was just coming back from his mistress's house. To his companions he asked,

"Wasn't that the crown prince just now?"

"Really?"

"At a time like this, without his friends?"

"It may very well be possible that it is our highness," he said with a hardly amused hint of cynicism. "Alright. It doesn't necessarily have to be so strange. Someone chase after him. If there's any trouble, use my name and politely bring him back," he ordered.

There was more than a common crowd of people in the middle of the streets. Slowing his horse's pace with great frustration, Gil expressionlessly cut through the gaps between the boisterously laughing people. Of course, he didn't have the appearance of being from royalty. Because the town people only knew their prince's face from portraits sold as a courtesy at festivals, he should be able to come out without them even recognizing him.

Sure enough, even though no one called out to him, Gil was not able to ignore them as he let his horse walk through. For some reason, the sight of people getting merry

and enjoying themselves got on his nerves. And, despite the light tones of the kithara [6]and flute, it seemed that they were making a little fool out of him. Was the laughter rising everywhere simply them pointing fingers at him?

His heartbeat throbbed faster. The drug was finally having its effect and started dispersing Gil's thoughts. As it were, the scenery before him, that he thought was softly disintegrating into a misshapen variety of viscous colours drawing him in, started to look like a row of little devils sneering at him.

Stop…

Every last one of them was laughing, pointing at him with twisted claws.

Take a look – that's Mephius's crown prince. That man is like a child, forever frightened by his father. He can't freely woo a single girl, that deplorable man.

He should just die already. A man whose rule is of no use to anyone in this country should just die right now.

Stop!

The series of disgusting colours squirmed and twisted all around him. The fear, which had likely been oppressed, further urged Gil's disgust and terror. He truly regretted that he hadn't brought a gun from the palace. Surely, if he filled all of these people with lead bullets, it would clear his head…

"Your Highness, Gil?"

Suddenly, there was someone holding his horse's bit. That moment, it first looked like one of the figures embodying the devil, but when Gil, shuddering on horseback, stared very hard, he noticed it was a man whose face he'd seen several times before.

Considering he was carrying a sword at his side, and also wearing a handgun at his waist, he had to be someone of the imperial guard, who were allowed to wear arms at times of peace. But because he knew him only his in military uniform, he looked like an entirely different person wearing ceremonial clothes.

"Do you have some business in a place like this?"

"No…"

The prince shook his head, pretending to be in a normal state of mind. The imperial guard was directly under the control of the emperor. That meant they stood at his

[6] An old Greek instrument, a bit like a lyre.

father's side, and they were not the kind of companions Gil wanted to be familiar with either way.

Although one could only become an officer class if he came from a good family, the ruler was permitted to freely appoint anyone regarding the soldiers forming his own division. Gil too, when he reached his fifteenth birthday two years ago, had received the authority to select soldiers directly under his own control, but that was merely a formality – in practice, he would one day directly inherit his father's army division.

"It's dangerous to be here on your own. Let me send a messenger to the court."

"Leave it, don't do something unnecessary. That aside, what's all this commotion?"

"Ahh."

The member of the imperial guard, around his mid-forties, narrowed his eyes with embarrassment. He pointed at the centre of the street. On top of a horse-drawn carriage that had its canopy removed, stood a young man and women fully dressed up.

"Tonight's my daughter's wedding ceremony," he laughed.

The girl was happily smiling with a face that resembled her father's. Her pure white dress, although it couldn't help being plain in comparison to those he'd seen at the imperial court, was strangely dazzling.

The daring, once-in-a-lifetime dress design revealed her cleavage, making her sensual body line stand out.

"The prince should also take care of his body, being in the offing for marriage. I can call for a subordinate, and hurry on to the castle—"

Half of the imperial officer's words didn't even reach Gil's ears.

The laughter, the sounds, and the people dancing in a circle, flickered darkly before him, just like a play of shadow puppets. The worthless smiles in the streets, the singing voices, and the dances increased the uneasiness within Gil.

Why were they all behaving in such a cheerful manner? Even he, the heir to the Mephian Imperial Throne, didn't see such things at underfoot among his days. No, maybe it was that, just because they were commoners, they could spend their days without fear? They hadn't chosen their lives. They received what they were given, and grieved for what was robbed of them. If he could also spend his days like that, how much comfort would it give?

It became all the more irritating. An all the more violent throbbing keenly put pressure on his brains. The thump, thump, thump, thumping made Gil's body tremble. The shadow puppets were shaking along vertically.

At that time, Gil's lips opened up in a semicircle. He was laughing.

What a foolish notion. That he, as the prince, should envy the happiness of such lowly humans. This would all become his territory one day. He just needed to remind them of that. He needed to teach them that, if such happiness was so easily given, it could also be snatched away in an instant.

"Right to the first night."

"Eh?"

The officer of the imperial guard holding his horse's bit once more raised his head. Although Gil was wiping drool from his mouth, the tone of his words was clear.

"I exercise the imperial family's right to the first night."

"Prince!"

The officer's shout made all of the surroundings faces face their way.

Are you finally looking?

As he got into the height of drunkenness, Gil laughed even more. If he'd had a mirror at hand right now, Gil would see that his own face resembled those demonic figures he was daydreaming about earlier.

Do you finally notice I'm not part of you, not just one more life, not just one more human being?

The males of the Mephian imperial family had the so-called right to the first night. It meant that, if there was a marriage between man and woman anywhere in the domain, almost without exception, he could take from the groom the right to spend the first night with the bride.

There was a time when it was believed the blood of a virgin was something filthy, and that going to bed with power-wielding royal family members or priests would cleanse that blood – although, with that said, it was essentially only a means to pluck high taxes, paid in order to avoid the right to the first night. The law was established about a little less than 200 years ago, in the midst of the successive battles with the Ryuujin Tribe that impoverished human civilization.

Nowadays, the right to the first night had become a dead letter. Just like the selection system of the imperial guard.

“Prepare some place, imperial officer. Are you listening to what I’m saying? If you go against the imperial family, not only you, but the bride too, will go to the guillotine.”

Surprise and confusion spread throughout the circle, creating a wave around Gil. The laughter subsided, the singing stopped, and the dancing broke up. The looks on the young pair atop the horse carriage got frozen still.

On the contrary, Gil didn’t stop laughing. As far as he knew, the right to the first night had never been claimed before. Of course, neither had his father, Guhl Mephius.

Didn’t his father say he wouldn’t become such a man? Someone who would leave his name in history? Didn’t even Ineli try to taunt him? He’d show he’d surpass his father. From now on, they couldn’t say whatever.

In a world that had fallen silent around him, Gil was the only one who felt truly satisfied from the bottom of his heart.

Half an hour later, Gil kept the bride waiting on the second floor of a cheap tavern close by. The security of the barroom was entrusted to none other than the imperial officer from earlier. While grinning broadly on his own, he went up the stairs with a bottle of alcohol. The sound of creaking wood was strangely comfortable.

He threw open the door, and the figure on the bed moved with a shudder. It was dark. The only light came from a soot-covered lamp all the way over to the pillow.

“Prince,” the woman, rubbing her hands together, tried to plead with him. “Please… please, let this slide. If it’s about the tax – I’ll pay! Please forgive me! I still… still haven’t entrusted my body to a man yet. Even my husband…”

“That’s why it’s called the right of the first night, isn’t it?” Gil said, sneering. “I’ll take care of all the tainted blood. After that, you can get intimate with your husband in peace, as much as you want.”

Throwing off his upper clothes, Gil sidled up to her on the bed. The bride let out a scream and backed away on the bed. He could see the flesh of her behind bulging through the thin clothing. Gil’s throat was rumbling.

At that time, there was a violent thumping on the door. Clicking his tongue and turning his head, Gil watched the imperial officer come into the room, and raised a stern look.

"It's insensitive for the father to break in upon the bride's wedding night. Although I heard there's a custom where witnesses are invited to a royal wedding's first night, that's not the case for you. Fall back."

"Well, prince, will you please reconsider? This is a disgrace to Mephius's imperial household!"

"What are you saying? Someone like you hasn't the position to scorn the imperial family. Openly disrespecting it like you just did is worthy of the death penalty!"

The imperial officer, Rone Jayce, watched the prince's eyes up front. They were unfocused, and froth was leaking from his mouth. With a single glance, he saw they were the effects of the black water lily. As the prince fixed his sharp gaze, he continued blurting out incoherent words.

"I… I am of the Mephian imperial family… no… I'm that Guhl Mephius's child. If you say the very country opposes me, fine, I'll have you and your family packed into an inescapable coliseum! Suffer at a dragon's fangs until you settle all alone in its stomach for all I care! Leave, if you don't like that. What!? That's still not enough? We can just resume the marriage after this. I'll even make sure to also put on one of those celebratory outfits."

Gil turned his white back his way.

Ah…

In that defenceless state, Rone was dizzied, struck by a severe indecisiveness.

Layla was his only daughter. Doing hard work as an officer of the imperial guard, he was never quite confident if he was a good father or not.

It was more than ten years ago, at the time of Rone's birthday. He returned home, arriving near midnight. Although, in the end, he had even forgotten that the day was his birthday, Layla had been lying asleep with her face on the table. While his wife had placed a blanket on her shoulders, she said,

"She tried her best to stay awake, you know."

His daughter was holding a white wreath of flowers, one she probably made herself, tightly in her hand.

As he'd softly placed her small hand in his own, he vowed he would do anything in exchange for his daughter's happiness. Even if it took his own life.

When he came to, Rone was about to jump on Gil. He nearly tumbled to the floor, as he fell forward with the prince. The screams of his brain, saying 'What are you doing!?', was swirling along with the sound of everything falling apart.

But, Rone was not really thinking of that at all. The prince was obviously using a drug that made him act this way. If he lost consciousness here, by the time he awoke, he would possibly not remember a single thing. Even if not, he wouldn't think much more of it than that had happened in a dream. Although it would be necessary to get a large crowd of people to cooperate with him, Rone would use any means necessary to ensure they did.

On the other side, Gil was currently in a state of frenzy. Having the belief he had to surpass his father or have his name be thoroughly defiled, he was about to raise his body, feeling signs of a wild beast. It was as if he wielded the power against his own father.

"Filth!"

As he struggled with this 'father', he noticed the handgun hanging at his opponent's waist. He frantically tried to seize it. Rone noticed it too. At the end of the silent struggle, the handgun fell from both their hands. It fell with a solid sound on the floor. They both quickly extended their hands towards it.

Bang! – when a gunshot echoed throughout.

Following the news he received from his attendant, Fedom rushed to the front of the tavern with a restrained sword.

The right to the first night, of all things!

Looking at his side, there were several figures gathered up, assimilating with the darkness in a place where they did not stand out in the streets. All their eyes were glaring at him and Fedom got chills running down his spine. It reminded him of a dripping wet fuse. You'd leave it alone, since it wouldn't make an explosion anyway, but if even one strong spark was incidentally thrown into the lot, it could quickly blow up anyway.

Clearing his throat, Fedom drew closer to the front of the bar room. Several people of the imperial guard were standing watch at the door. They had bewildered looks on their faces. Summoned by their superior officer, they hadn't received an explanation on why they had to guard this bar either. Fedom raised his title as a council member and was led through.

Then – bang! – a gunshot rang that made his eardrums quiver.

Standing still for a moment, Fedom then quickly ran up the stairs. His attendant, being a great fighter, leading ahead, opened the door. They equally caught their breath. The smell of gunpowder reached their nose. There was a puddle of blood spreading on the cheap building floor.

……

Under those circumstances, a strange silence blew over them.

For a little while, Fedom wasn't able to think of anything. He had no words, his mind seemingly refusing to accept what he saw for fact, and he only stared at it vacantly. However, bit by bit, reality started corroding his brain cells and a certain thought arose within Fedom Aulin's mind. Even *he* thought it was a ridiculous idea. It was too much.

No…

Fedom swallowed a huge amount of saliva. Wasn't this some heavenly revelation? Now, to break to the old empire's shell and give it fresh blood? He could give real meaning to this country, suitable for its current turbulent times. Wasn't this nothing more than a sign from the heavens, that no other than he could do this?

Despite the stench of blood in the cheap tavern, right now, Fedom's eyes seemed as if they were wrapped by a golden light. While personally shuddering, experiencing excitement and fear, he realized that, if he wanted this, he had to hurry, and impatiently urged on.

At first, after commanding his subordinate to let no one enter this room, he approached the father and daughter who were embracing each other, shivering, on the bed.

"…I am prepared," the imperial officer said. "But my daughter, and my family, is not to blame. I take all responsibility for this on myself. Please, have mercy on everyone else but me. I'll do whatever you desire of me, immediately; be it the coliseum, you can make me face a dragon barehanded, offer my neck to the guillotine, or tie my four limbs to dragons and tear me apart."

"Oh?"

Fedom's cheeks were trembling. He was looking down for a quick glance at the man lying down with the bared back. He didn't move a single inch. It looked like he was already no longer breathing.

"Do not fear," Fedom said, albeit in a shaky voice. "He's still breathing."

"Huh?"

"Didn't you hear me? He's still breathing. Do not fear. The crown prince will be in good health."

Rone Jayce remained quiet, still surprised. Fedom quickly resumed speaking.

"All right, if you still want to protect your family, I'll ask you to not leak out a single word that I say, got it? If just one little thing about what happened here reaches my ears through someone else, you, your family, and all your blood relatives will be the first to enter a dragon's stomach. Got it? In short, I'm telling you that *isn't* the case right now. Understand?"

The imperial officer, Rone Jayce, suddenly glanced up. A spurt of blood on the chest, his daughter was clinging on to him. Over their heads, loomed Fedom's face. Those eyes with undetermined focus were much like the ones Prince Gil had just a little while ago.

Chapter 3 – A New Mask

Part 1

These past few days, Tarkas had indeed been busier than normal, bustling about all over the place. And the busier the busy man became, the livelier he got too. So light on his feet as if they'd grown wings, he showed them the peak of pride.

Whether it was building a stadium exclusively for the use of the Tarkas Gladiatorial Group, or planning to buy a dozen of a new dragon species, Tarkas had large-scale future plans for his sword-slaves. As usual, Orba wasn't of the same mind.

"If you're able to get appeal in front of the imperial families, I might think of rewarding you, Orba. The opponent will also be exceptionally prepared. Make it a

good fight. Look, if you can't get worked up, you'll just have to do like you always do."

Although he smacked his shoulder with an ear-to-ear smile, it honestly had a weird taste to it. Gowen, who heard it all, also gave a wry smile, but it immediately turned into a serious look.

"I have no doubt that the Tarkas Gladiatorial Group is a major company in this industry. Even so, I never heard of Tarkas having connections with the imperial family and other top brass. He's only worked with nobles like Fedom, the Lord of Birac and director of the Gladiator's Guild. Although Tarkas has apparently only met him face to face during meetings. Nevertheless, until now, he had never even received a single direct job from Fedom. But I think it's such an enormous job, this. I constantly told him that it's better to request the cooperation from other places, but Tarkas has refused them all."

"You're prone to worry, old man," Shique said, shrugging his shoulders. "Isn't it fine? Even if we get their disapproval, it won't be our heads that roll. It only means we'll have to find another place to fight as gladiators."

Orba, too, shared the same sentiment. It made little difference where he was. The only way for a gladiator to secure his life was to earn gold. And if it meant his road to freedom got even one step closer, he would continue to fight wherever. That was all there was to it.

Several more days passed after that, and the preparations for their departure to Seirin Valley had finally started. They loaded their weapons and armour onto carts and performed the arduous task of taking the dragons from their cages.

Inside the spacious dragon's abode, Orba was wordlessly watching over Hou Ran guiding the dragons. Although he'd seen several animal trainers here, he didn't know another human being who could handle dragons like this.

There had been one such expert trainer who could 'make three Sozos's dance to music" using a flute, who fed them every day at a fixed time, gently brushed their snouts, and kept doing just that as a daily routine. He was killed easily, eaten by the Sozos' on a whim.

That was primarily a dragon's nature.

A human showing affection and training them, could achieve results to some extent, but there was never something like complete certainty. Even dragons that should

have been domesticated for a long time nested feelings within. In reality, they were not so sure about their intelligence, after being tricked by humans who've set up elaborate traps of, for example, pitfalls and collapsing walls.

But as far as he knew, among these dragons, Orba had never seen a time when Ran's orders didn't seem effective. And she didn't use a whip or lure them with bait. Ran only blew them a low whistle and they stood in line like orderly trained soldiers, carrying their huge bodies one by one into the direction of Ran's beckoning hand.

But, there seemed to be individual differences among them.

"Orba. Help me out without just looking."

With slightly irritated words, Ran folded her arms near one medium-sized Baian dragon. Having dropped its waist in the corner of the cage, it didn't seem to try to move at all. Although Orba didn't think it was his place to blame him for ignoring Ran's orders, as he turned to the corner, it looked like it wasn't going to head the other way no matter what happened.

"What should I do? Tie a chain around its neck?"

A tranquilizing gun had hardly any effect on a Baian. However, it took a lot of manpower to pull it by the chains. The medium-sized Baian was quite short compared to a Sozos, but its shoulders were still at about the same height as the head of a grown man. It was about three metres long, and the rugged hide of its body was much like armour to the touch. Small angular comb-like scales sprang up in a line, giving it the appearance of an atrocious lizard.

"You should get on, Orba."

"What do you mean?"

Orba was taken by surprise. It wasn't like there weren't any gladiator games where they rode atop Baians, but it took great pains to put someone who was not familiar with it on a Baian's back. In short, you just didn't know when the dragon was going to shake you off and trample you underneath, and in the meantime you had to try and kill your opponent. It was intended to entertain the audience with the thrill of the situation but, without magic or the efficacy of drugs, it was impossible to handle the heavy tank-like Baians.

"Dragons are different from beasts. Even if they're degenerated, dragons have a dragon's intellect. Humans simply cannot understand it. But you'll be fine, Orba. They've surely opened their hearts."

When the girl's lips started to come apart, she spoke as if she was singing. However, because of the contents, virtually ordering Orba to 'die', it was incomprehensible even for a gladiator. But, as aforementioned, the truth was that he'd never seen someone more skilled in handling dragons than her. Besides, if he saw her characteristic defenseless smile, for some mysterious reason he was willing to believe any outrageous thing she said.

Orba slowly approached the Baian. The dragon started kicking his hind legs onto the floor, raising a single growl and pulling its tongue, which was split in two, in and out restlessly, as he looked down at Orba with eyes similar to glass beads.

Orba instantly gathered his courage. As he moved aside, he transmitted it to his legs and jumped towards its back. In an instant, he landed on the dragon's backside. To avoid being thrown off, Orba swung both his arms around the thick neck. Although unexpectedly, it seemed almost as if the dragon's hot blood got transmitted when he touched it, and Orba naturally didn't know whether or not there was a change to the dragon's mindset. However, the Baian sluggishly came to its feet, and started walking to the place guided by the young woman.

"This child was born only half a year ago," Hou Ran said as she led the beast. "Even after half a year, its body is no longer outsized by an adult's. However, they're still children at heart. Even so, among animal trainers, there are those who can't see the distinction."

The four Baians were put into a new cage with a pulley. That cage could be pulled by either two Sozos's or a single Houban. But, because Sozos's were considered to be unpredictable – although Hou Ran said the Baian dragons were actually the most capricious variety because it was impossible to perfectly suppress one – they would spend the journey in a cage.

So, as everyone was pressed for a hurry on the preparations, when it was only one hour before departure, small-sized dragons suddenly rushed into the parade grounds.

They were three Tengo's in a row. They were even one size smaller than the Baians and, because of their maneuverability in tight turns, often used on the battlefield instead of horses. Their big heads resembled that of a bird's, its long neck nearly bent to the ground, and it bounced about running on two thin legs.

When the dragons suddenly made their stop, the lead dragonrider, nearly sent flying by the force, tumbled off.

"S-Shit, that's why dragons—"

The man, spitting out sand that seemed to have entered his mouth, had his plump body covered with a purple robe. Judging from his appearance, he looked like a wealthy merchant making easy money. The two figures behind him, also sitting on their respective dragons, quickly got down and lent a hand to the man who seemed to be their employer as Hou Ran ran over to their position.

The front Tengo had bent its legs and was crouched down. It had probably been overworked, as white vomit came from its mouth. Ran was about to stroke the back of its neck when,

"Don't come any closer to His Excellency, slave!"

There was the single blow of a whip. Although Ran immediately tried to jump back, she fell and skimmed her ankle. Ran didn't run however, but glared at the armed soldier right in front of her. He was still a young soldier, and when he noticed Ran's hair and skin, he got an even more furious expression.

"The tribe worshipping the Dragon God, huh? Damn impertinent savages…"

The tendency to look down on the nomads, who held no fixed territory, as an uncivilized people was strong in all lands. In that sense, as was the same for Orba's case, Tarkas was thoroughly pragmatic.

The soldier once more brandished his whip.

But soon after, he raised a low groan and became rigid. Orba's hand came from the side, grasped his wrist, and twisted it upwards. As he writhed in pain, bending his spine, he got kicked forward.

"I do not know where your 'Excellency' is, but we have our own ways here. If you say you hate having to mingle with the likes of slaves, you shouldn't purposely set foot in a slave den. Please make your leave."

He snatched away the soldier's whip, and struck it to the ground.

"D-Do you bloody know your place!?"

The soldier was about to stand up and unsheathe the sword at his hip when,

"Wait! Wait, Orba!"

Tarkas was running up to them from behind. It took all his strength to spur on his stout body, which was evenly matched with that of the robed man.

"Y-You, utter moron! Basically, you're not even supposed to speak out of turn. Hurry and get back to your preparations!! …Ohh, Fedom-sama, if there's been any discourtesy, I humbly ask for forgiveness. Especially considering you've directly come to visit such a squalid place like this, I think—"

"Ahh, at ease. You don't have to bow, Tarkas," the robed man said, as he rubbed his hands and proceeded to shake hands with the slave trader. "I have business with this man here. Orba? Yes, it was Orba. You."

He pointed his finger at the mask Orba, who was about to leave supporting Ran's shoulder, was wearing.

Naturally, Tarkas was taken by surprise, but so was Orba himself. In the first place, it was quite rare for a person from the outside world to refer to a sword-slave by name.

Orba stopped in his tracks. When he tried to recall where he'd heard the name Fedom before, the face got bizarrely distorted, as it didn't resemble the face of any person Orba had seen until now. Only much later did he notice that it was a smile, stifling the usual scorn for slaves as if to guess his overall mood.

At that time, he forgot all about that strange expression, for he started speaking unexpected words directed at Orba.

"Do you remember me? No, you may not remember it. At the time, you were hardly even conscious. I'm a council member of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius, the Lord of Birac. I'm also acting as the head of the Gladiator's Guild, and I'm the one who made you wear that mask."

It was the first time he'd entered Tarkas' office without the owner himself present. But of course, he didn't care about something like that. Above all, Orba's devouring eyes were staring at the man before him – the one who called himself Fedom, a leading Mephian aristocrat.

"What's with those eyes? It looks like you'd immediately draw a sword and cut off my head, if you had one."

I could even strangle you to death barehanded, Orba thought, but of course he didn't say those words out loud. Next to Fedom stood a boy who might be a page, a pallid-faced houseboy-like youth, and a soldier who was the only one armed. It would be really careless.

"Even if you bear a grudge against me, it's like you're barking up the wrong tree. It is not on my behalf that you were imprisoned, but because of your own crimes."

"Then…"

It was the first time Orba opened his mouth since this man had called out his name.

"Why did you make me wear this mask? Is this what you nobles call fun? Doesn't it matter how much I suffer, because I'm just a slave!?"

"Mind your words, you!" the soldier angrily shouted.

But Fedom said, "I don't mind."

"I do not have the liberty to play around with slaves who aren't certain of their tomorrows," he continued. "However… Just because your days were uncertain, yes, how admirably it is that you survived to this day. Back then, you were nothing more than a child. Having survived as a gladiator for two years… can it be called luck? No. Rather than something like luck, this is, as *you* explained so well – the golden mean of fate[7], that's said to have decided all humans lives from the instant of the universe's creation, right?"

He turned his head to the youth behind him. The young man gave a thin smile and slightly stroked his chin. Although, in a sense, it was more disrespectful than Orba's attitude among the Mephian nobility, Fedom showed no signs that he was bothered by it.

"Besides, you were practically a child at the time, but your physique has also gotten considerably more adult-like in these two years. You wouldn't be the same person if it weren't for the mask… Hmph, the timing's a bit off, though. Give it another year and your body would've developed more and more, but it could also have ended up badly."

Of course, Orba had absolutely no idea what this man was talking about. Fedom was talking as if he'd met up with an old friend he'd missed, while it had been a curse for Orba, so to speak, due to the mask always separating his face and the outside with iron during those two years, in which it had continued to fiercely smoulder his face for a period of time.

He'd floundered about, stained with blood because he'd tried to pry off the mask with his nails, and broke the ankles where the chain connected his feet because of his struggles. And each time, Orba had cursed everything for the fate he had lost, and the fate he had gotten in return.

Indeed, for two years that mask had been with Orba, who had yet to accept the hardships and deaths, and it had become the very symbol of his determination to take back that what was bereft of him from the same hand that took his mother, brother, and Alice.

[7] A made-up term; "mean" as in "ratio" or "percentage"

And then, suddenly an unfamiliar noble came before him, saying he's the one that made him wear it. It was as Fedom said. If he'd had a sword at hand… No, it could be a sword or a dagger, or just a very heavy vase – anything nearby that could be used to kill. The instant Fedom showed an opening, he would've jumped up and smashed it into the man's face. Of course, even now, it still wasn't too late for that.

But, whether or not Fedom knew about Orba's potential double suicide, the man continued to stall.

"Very well, Orba. I'll take off that mask, right here in this place."

"What?"

"And that's not all. From now on, you will also be released from your status as a slave. There's no longer the need for you to pick up a sword and kill. However, this doesn't mean you'll be a free man. It's simple. These are the conditions. In just a little while from now, Tarkas will leave you in my custody. But it's no more than that."

"Wait."

"And during that time, you don't go against my words and do as I say. There's no need to be afraid. It's much easier than being among slaves and killing each other. You will only obey me like a puppet. However—"

"Wait!"

Orba unintentionally let a shout escape his mouth. He shook his head in irritation before the tongue-tied Fedom in front of him.

"If you are the one who made me wear this mask, why do you now suddenly come to remove it? And why would you free me from slavery if I still have to follow your orders? Just what kind of joke is this!? What's the reason you suddenly want to remove my mask here and now? How come you made me wear it in the first place? You bastards so easily manipulated a person's fate to your own whimsical satisfactions. Just how much more entertainment do you seek!?"

While he was uninterested in the words themselves, probably because he couldn't grasp how much anguish had been included in that two-year period, Fedom shrank away, startled. He changed places with the soldier, who stepped forward to protect his master. Orba was glaring at Fedom's figure over the soldier's shoulder, as a sharp glint lit up in his eyes behind the mask.

"What do you intend to do by taking off the mask, freeing me from being a slave, and buying me over? Are you raising some sort of child assassins!?"

"W-Wait. Wait, I tell you."

This time it was Fedom's turn to take over control. Hidden behind the soldier's back, he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"I understand. However, we do not have enough time and this isn't the place. Would it be better if I tell you that you'll be killed if you don't follow my orders?"

"Then you'd better hurry up and start talking. About what you intend to do with me."

The soldier's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Even though it was just an unarmed person in front of him, it looked like he was facing a carnivorous animal with those glistening, golden eyes glaring at him.

Noble and slave. Basically, the two weren't even supposed to meet eye to eye, but the air of intimidation that reversed these positions between them was gradually occupying the room. Then,

"Fine, just wait a bit."

The student-like youth cut into the conversation. He took one step forward, standing between Orba and Fedom.

"This is not an extremely complicated story. But to explain it from the beginning, surely takes precious time. What should I do in order to try and convince him first? Can I start by taking off the mask?"

"Once it is removed it cannot be used again," Fedom said unhappily. "If this guy says he won't obey afterwards, any leverage but killing him disappears."

"There's any number of ways in doing this. I'd like you to have faith in me."

While he heard the strange exchange between the two, Orba noticed that the man, who looked like a youth, actually carried a considerable age. He had a somewhat hoarse voice, and his hair was mixed with white.

"I understand, Hermann. Go ahead."

Receiving Fedom's permission, the man called Hermann headed over to Orba's side. Orba backed off by reflex and got surprised when he felt the man's fingers fix closely on his mask.

Orba was able to ascertain the distance of his own sword and spear, and also instantly gauge his opponent's attacking range. That was the talent Orba also had two years ago, and what made him live that long.

And yet, Hermann had quietly and easily been able to creep up to his chest.

"Don't be afraid," Hermann said with a grin. Having applied his fingers to the mask, he came even closer to his face.

"That mask does not come off even with superhuman strength. Also, there's no such thing as a key to take it off. But I guess you know that best yourself after these two years, right?"

Orba doubted whether the one wearing the mask wasn't Hermann instead. Was it because it looked like he'd stuck human skin onto his face and was in fact hiding his true face behind it? The skin was strangely stiff and, depending on the angle of light, he might not look like a young man after all.

But above all, it was those two eyes gazing his way. Unlike his facial expression, only the eyes gave a sharp light similar to that of a sword. The man resembled none of the many formidable opponents Orba had been confronted with, but he was struck with fear that surpassed all of them.

"Don't touch me," Orba said shivering, he did not want to admit to himself that he'd lost his fangs. "Besides, if you don't have a key, how are you going to remove the mask?"

"The key was just something I made up. I told you not to be afraid. Now, after two years, I'm going to release you."

Before Orba could retort, there were signs of fingers wriggling and touching. It seemed to come from within Orba's own body.

A fierce sound rang out. It sounded as if the world itself had started to crack, as Orba's mask began to move. As he realized he felt no lingering feeling for being together these two years, while it slowly moved from the sides, it suddenly dropped down. It fell with a strangely sweet, clattering sound on the floor. Unable to move after that, Orba gently stroked his cheeks.

It was a dazzling feeling, giving no sound and he immediately covered his eyes with his hand. Although it felt like Hermann had used some kind of magical attack, truthfully, he already knew the answer. In some way, this was more shocking to him than someone aiming for his life at short range, which caused his body to shudder.

Orba – widely recognized as a top-class swordsman who, once he picked up a sword, was not afraid of anything, - got irritated with himself that he was now getting frightened like a child, and slowly opened his eyes.

There was the figure of Fedom standing stock still. No, it wasn't only him. The soldier present and the page boy too, were staring blankly with their mouths open. They didn't move a single muscle.

Then, suddenly the young soldier stirred. It looked like he had come back to his senses, when he suddenly kneeled down on the floor.

"C-Crown Prince!?" the young man said in a shivering voice. "This… e-excuse me for my rudeness. I didn't know you were the prince at first. Please, I beg you for forgiveness!"

"Impossible," Fedom said. His fat body was trembling all over. "It's impossible! But… but, Hermann. The previous ones didn't look nearly as much alike. Even taking two years into account, I never expected a mirror-image like this…"

"That's why it's called sorcery," Hermann laughed with a muffled voice. "Didn't I tell you? With luck at your side, this man will certainly become of use to the master."

For a while, all sound ceased to come out of anyone's mouth.

Orba had clearly lost awareness of his voice and body. He was timidly touching his flesh-and-blood cheeks. There was no touch of iron. That hard, cold mask was completely absent and replaced by a warm and tender skin. Half in a daze, Orba wondered whether this all might just be a dream.

"Do you want a mirror?"

The only calm one, Hermann, indiscreetly fumbled through Tarkas's desk, took out a hand-mirror and tossed it over at Orba. As he caught it in his hands, Orba looked at it with bated breath.

A pale faced, slim-eyed man was staring back at him. These two years, whenever he looked into a mirror, only that iron mask mimicking a tiger appeared before him. He initially felt that there was no mistaking this as real, but soon, Orba had a certain uncomfortable feeling that obstructed his happiness.

It was definitely his own face. And yet, something was different. While his eyes, nose, and mouth had surely remained the same, he had a suspicion that certain subtle angles had changed.

Two years had passed. Was it possible he'd forgotten about his own face?

No… but he didn't know the reason for this. After all, he had a feeling that his eyes were strangely sharp compared to before, his lips had become a little bit thin, and his nose seemed to have gotten slightly bigger.

"Well then."

Fedom awkwardly and abruptly broke the silence that was flowing so far.

"If it's like this, your intentions will no longer pose a problem. It looks like you were decided on two years ago. By some power of the gods, demons, the Dragon God of old, or maybe even an existence we don't know the name of. Without it, you could never be so much alike."

The moment Orba felt like asking what he was talking about, Fedom immediately made a declaration.

"You are already no longer this Orba. Of course, you're also no longer some sword-slave. From the moment the mask was removed, you were born anew as a different person. What's more, you're not even a common man one might find anywhere, either. Got it? From today on, you've graciously become the one known as the heir to the throne of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius, Gil Mephius!"

Part 2

Fedom immediately took Orba out of Tarkas's sword-slave training grounds. Because it was carried out so quickly, for a while, it didn't even look like he was released from sword-slavery. It looked like they had come to their agreement without informing Tarkas about it.

Because Orba obviously didn't think that his sword slave hell would suddenly end like this, he didn't actually experience it like that. More than that, he truly didn't know in whose hands he'd ended up and whose intentions for the future he was going to roll into – as had always been the case from his childhood until now.

Fedom held several mansions here and there in Mephian territory. Although he brought Orba to one of them, for some reason he had been instructed to cover his face with a mantle in the meantime.

Fedom led Orba to a room with a carpet spread all over, locked the door, and told him he was finally allowed to take off the mantle. The soldier and the page who'd

also come to the training grounds were the only others in the room. That magician named Herman had vanished.

After he took off the mantle, everyone present was once again closely peering onto his face.

“No matter how many times I see… this. I feel like someone is playing tricks on my mind. As if you’re actually Mephius’s imperial prince Gil, and testing me out.”

“I’m the one who doesn’t get this shit! Mephius’s imperial prince!? Just what the heck are you saying? Speak so that a gladiator like me will understand!”

Orba was getting considerably irritated. Not taking any offence from his insolent way of speaking, Fedom nodded his head.

“Naturally,” he said, and started from the beginning.

The tale went back to two years ago. From the day Orba got imprisoned.

Fedom, who was the Lord of Birac, originally wouldn't hear anything of the report when Orba was arrested because he was only a petty criminal, but for some reason he received an urgent message from the city guards.

But when he spared the figure of Orba lying down in his cell a single look, he couldn’t help but raise a surprised voice.

“You truly looked a lot like the crown prince of Mephius.”

Fedom thought on it for a while. Even at the best of times, the crown prince was rumoured for his eccentric mannerism. Although no one would truly believe the prince would appear in the arena as a gladiator, doubts on his bloodline could sully the imperial family’s dignity and at most pose a problem in the distant future, which in turn could question Fedom’s loyalty.

So he’d decided on concealing Orba’s face. Which is why he’d made him wear that particular mask.

Of course, Orba believed that wasn’t all there was to it. Although he was surprised to hear he resembled the crown prince, it seemed a little exaggerated to request the assistance of a magician.

The pain that had seemed to completely burn his face with flames. The out-of-place feeling he had of himself when he touched his face after removing the mask. Hadn’t they taken all of those things into account from the very start?

His entire body once again seething with anger, Orba pretended to be calm.

“I understand the reason for having to wear the mask. So, what’s the reason you took it off?”

“It’s as I said earlier.”

“Become the prince? Do you mean to make me a body double?”

“Oh? It looks like you're thinking correctly. It's just like that. If you’re this similar to the prince, you should be able to serve the nation simply because of that. I think you should be honoured. Moreover, it’ll all be in exchange for your release from slavery – and for your freedom. There’s certainly nothing more to tell you than that.”

“Isn’t Mephius supposed to sign peace with Garbera? Is another war about to happen?”

“A body double isn’t someone only useful on the battlefield. But if you know of the peace, do you also know about the prince’s wedding?”

“It’s because I was one of the sword-slaves.”

“Well, now you will proceed to Seirin Valley for a different matter.”

Fedom explained that there seemed to be many people in and out of the country who weren’t at ease with the wedding. By any chance, it might be possible that someone would try to interfere with the wedding by deliberately causing a commotion, and some of them might intend to assassinate the crown prince or the Garberan princess.

“The likelihood that the danger may reach the prince’s person is high. Naturally, we intend to carry out a flawless guard unit. However, because we wanted to build a mutual allied relationship as quickly as possible, we settled on this marriage in a hurry. We’ve decided to use you as an insurance if it turns out to be the worst case scenario.”

Orba spent a little time thinking. It seemed he had now been placed in this position on a very short notice. The wedding was in three days. Having only been a gladiator just a while ago, he had to act as a prince within three days’ time.

What a bullshit story!

Although he wanted to refuse, for the story didn’t seem to hold any grounds, if it was true that most of the currently mentioned circumstances were highly classified

state secrets, it could already be a life-threatening matter for Orba. If he refused, it meant death.

Earlier, Orba had already bantered with threatening words, but his opponent had not been deterred. Sweat was vaguely forming on the skin of his face that was exposed to the air for the first time in two years. Up until now, it had been different from a gladiator match. This was not an opponent he could win against by fighting. That was the situation right now.

The prince of Mephius, huh…?

A fleeting thought popped into his head. His heart was throbbing violently on the other side of his thick chest. Orba sucked in a small breath, and once again kept up a calm outward appearance as he enquired,

"If I have to take up being a double – for how long should I have to act like the prince? And what of the part at the end of the marriage ceremony?"

"Why? Do you wish to skip to that part so fast?" Fedom said, laughing satisfactorily. "Needless to say, you can't afford to get sneaked into the princess's bed at the bridal night. You will have to keep it up until we judge it's been enough. It won't be for such a long time."

"Let me ask one more thing."

"What is it? Speak up."

"Where's the guarantee that you won't kill me when this business is over?"

"What?"

"If it turns out that you used a body double for a wedding between members of royalty, we can assume that it'll scar Garbera's pride and war might spread once more. Even the most insignificant person who knows about the body double can compromise the story. But they say dead men tell no tales, right?"

Orba gave a glance to the soldier and the page inside the room. The page-like boy already had a pale face, but the soldier too showed signs of shivering. Fedom clicked his tongue, his good mood taking a full turnaround.

"You're just a slave, and yet you intend to strike a deal with me? There's no need to worry about such unnecessary things. But you're right, one might act as you say. Obviously, it's out of the question to let you go because you share the prince's face. However, and I say this because it does not contradict with what I said earlier, a

body double isn't useful only at the time of the wedding ceremony, right? Although there will usually be some inconveniences that may give reason for you to cover your face, I intend to let you spend a decent life as a person of my protégé."

Orba sank into silence for a while again. His face resembled the crown prince so closely that it had surprised even this Fedom. So surely that hadn't been part of his original plan. But of course, that would in no way lead to a perfect guarantee for everything.

"I understand," Orba said, giving his consent. "It's a deal. Those aren't bad conditions. However, I don't have the confidence anyone will be able to make me memorize the gestures appropriate for a crown prince."

"It's a deal then, from what I can tell. The negotiations are complete."

Giving a smile, Fedom left his seat, as if he didn't even come here to stand in place and stare at the fruits of his labour.

"Come over. That's why I brought my page Dinn, who will, for starters, teach you the necessary etiquettes in the meantime."

A hectic period of time passed for Orba in the three days after that. He did not have to clean the lodgings, look after the dragons, practice his sword, or be occupied with other work that wore down his mind and body. At the beginning, he assumed the only correction needed was to simply set his posture straight. To throw out his chest, straighten his back, and pull in his chin. But he also had to familiarize himself with a new manner of walking.

The page, Dinn, did not only sport charming features but also demonstrated his skills as an excellent trainer, as he gave Orba strict step-by-step orders in succession.

Using parts of his mind he usually did not use, he'd honestly gotten so exhausted that he was short for breath, but another type of training was waiting for him immediately after.

Dinn took out a hand-mirror. When Orba asked what was next, the boy handed him the mirror and said,

"How to laugh," while giving him a smile of his own.

That congested schedule, within three days, didn't seem to spare any time for him to rest his mind. While Orba never expected to suddenly become a crown prince – it

felt just like a ridiculous notion, every time he happened to think of how he'd been thrown into this altogether – it reminded Orba of his time as a sword-slave.

I've lived through these two years for what? I've been ordered like a stupid dog to risk my life, have other people killed, and for what?

He continued to throw in the firewood to keep the blue will-of-the-wisp flame burning in the back of his heart.

If I run away from here, I'll be killed immediately, or at best be doubled back as a sword-slave.

It was hard to take notice of, because it had all happened so suddenly, but there was at least one bright side. And if even a single light shone into his life, for Orba had been walking and fumbling through the darkness all this time, it was unmistakably a sign of progress within this current drastic change in environment.

These past two years, he'd nearly lost himself amongst the blood, vomit, spinal fluids, and entrails, knowing that he couldn't reach somewhere quiet. But there was no way he would stop reaching out his hand, even though what he aimed to take hold of was almost equal to trying to reach heaven.

At least, that was what Orba himself believed. And so, he continued to obediently receive the boy's education.

When the sun set, although Dinn also instructed him to, he immersed himself in a tub of hot water and cleansed his body. He could stretch out his body as much as he wanted, and they cut a huge amount of his black unkempt hair that was bound on his back. They also shaved his face with a razor, and when he rose from the tub afterwards, fine linen underwear, a silk tunic, and velvet trousers were prepared for him.

To sleep in, he received a bed with so much space that he had room to spare, even if he excessively spread both his arms and legs. The bed reminded him of the touch of the fair-skinned women he'd spent several times with at night when he'd still been the leader of the boys.

Where am I?

While drowsily wandering between sleep and waking, Orba suddenly heard his own voice within himself.

Brother… I can't sleep.

Take hold of my hand…

Brother…

Seirin Valley – the land where it was said they first set foot on this planet from the Space Immigrant Ship. It was a story from the mythological age, more than five hundred years ago. When you heard the tale, it indeed seemed a sacred, although quite exaggerated, plot of land, but there were virtually dozens of places with similar legends spread all over the world.

The valley lay in a secluded part to the south. Hollowed into the cliffs was a small palace built of wood and marble. There were shallow reliefs displayed on the passage walls that showed the many legendary events that had occurred from the time of the space ship's 'holy descent' up to the founding of Mephius. Because they were decorated with many types of jewels, shadows wriggled to and fro whenever it was lit up by the fire from the iron braziers, making it look like it was alive and breathing.

And, the spacious open hall that lay even deeper inside had gathered a huge crowd of ladies and gentlemen. Although it was inside of the cliff, there was plenty of light, and the sparkling lights of hoisted glass scattered all over the place.

A group of master musicians had taken up place in the corner and played various songs, from old-style up to the currently popular high-tempo music, depending on the request. Several people began to improvise their dancing, and the laughter here and there didn't cease.

"Prince," someone called out to him.

"Your Highness, congratulations."

"Prince Gil!"

"Congratulations on your wedding."

All the people mingled together, although they called him 'Your Highness' or 'Prince Gil', and greeted him with smiles. Orba did exactly what he was taught when he was faced with them, giving a generous smile and slightly raising his hand in response.

Fedom was walking perfectly close to Orba.

"Listen, Orba," Fedom had said that morning, when he came to pick up Orba by coach. A tense air of a warrior ready to fight a battle to the death drifted around him.

"Naturally, the people attending the party from the Garberan side, but even those from Mephian side, have not been informed about your true identity. After all, I don't know from where such information might get leaked. But the behaviour and such of the imperial family is not something you can master within three days or so after all. You don't do anything. You don't think anything. You don't look at anything. You move when I tell you to and talk when I tell you to. That's all. Understand?"

Despite all, he felt like his body was in no way accustomed to his manner of walking. It felt to him as if it was hard to walk, even compared to having his feet in chains.

Above all, it was the people – the many people. They were dressed in such fine clothes his eyes were spinning, and not a single one was ignoring Orba. The ones that were nearby bowed, expressed their gratitude, or approached him with raised hands. And they all smiled, mouthing the word 'congratulations'.

The ones in the distance pointed at Orba. Huddling together and chatting amongst each other as they stared at him.

No – it wasn't about Orba. The person they saw in their eyes and greeted with their voice was not Orba. He understood as much. Although he'd known this for no more than three days, he still found it impossible to imagine himself as the crown prince.

Orba suddenly forgot even how to walk and was hardly able to return his greetings to one of his retainers. However, they only passed it off as a charming sight, apparently thinking the tension was caused because he was about to have his first meeting with his bride.

"Throw your chest out a little more," Fedom obstinately whispered into his ear. "Aren't you a gladiator? How can you be scared of a place like this?"

He wanted to call him a shithead, but could not, and the more he became aware of his awkward manner of walking, the more his face continued to cramp up. Far from having prince-like behaviour, Orba hadn't even gotten used to his real face after removing the iron mask.

He quickly turned his look to the table where there was so much food lined up that, no matter how many people were in this hall, they definitely wouldn't be able to eat it all. To make matters worse, not a single plate was left empty, for if even a single empty plate stood out, it immediately got replaced by one fully loaded with cuisine.

If he would reach out to take an armful, it would probably be worth more than a sword-slave's yearly amount of food. When he was a child, he wasn't able to see the shining colourful fruits hanging from the eaves, or have the fragrant aroma of grilled

meat stimulating his appetite, unless they'd finished a very big job. But although it was only a small amount, even that was nothing compared to the mountain of high-priced foods piled up before him.

Were the ones who eat these things every day the ones that burned down my village?

Even thinking of it now, he couldn't help but remember, as the Mephian noble families were carved in his heart as the target for his hatred for a long time,

Our people were just able to manage our harvest for the year, but they took away the small amount of provisions we had left in stock, burned it down, and also went ahead and killed people…

Orba tightly clenched his fist underneath the long sleeves of his ceremonial clothes.

With proud faces they claim that something like this wasted amount of eating, drinking, dancing, and laughing is civilization and the noble way of life. They're looking down on my people, laughing at us.

You can all drop dead!

You sons of bitches are man-eating barbarians. I'm going to set this place on fire. You can roast in the flames for all I care! I'll praise you for your noble pride if you can still laugh while your limbs are being devoured!

A wave of anger passed over for a while, but immediately after the fever got to a high, only coldness remained.

Not yet.

Orba struggled to put a smile on his face as he arduously gritted his molars. He would eventually roast and kill them, but right here right now was not the time or place to make his move.

Right now, Orba couldn't do anything. This situation of Fedom using him here as the prince's body double happened so fast, but someday he'd eventually find an opportunity. Until then, in a sense to conserve his strength and as a means to obtain information, he had to do what Fedom told him to…

Then, it got noisier around him, and Orba, understanding from experience that the atmosphere in the hall had changed, also raised his head. Up to now, the wind of their gazes had been blowing only against Orba, but now there was a crack in the lid.*

A single girl made her appearance at the other side of the hall, and naturally she also attracted Orba's eyes. Accompanied by an older woman, she gracefully came walking in with her pale face bent down.

"The third princess of Garbera," Fedom whispered.

Although Orba had expected this, he still couldn't hide his surprise.

Isn't she still just a kid?

Those were the honest thoughts Orba had. Even the arms coming out of her sleeves were thin, but although it seemed like he was likely to break them off if he only grabbed them, for some reason she didn't give off a frail impression at all. He even felt the breathtaking dignity, with her spine straightened up and her long hair swaying faintly along her figure as she walked.

The dress that she held up at the hem had hardly any exquisite embroidery or decorations, but the lack of articles did not hinder or make it plain. The pure white silk material actually emphasized even more of the purity of her youthful and innocent beauty, and her womanly sensuality.

"Princess Vileena Owell. Indeed, she's currently your fiancée. Go and greet her soon. Don't be coarse, but do not abase yourself either. You're the prince of Mephius after all."

Part 3

Pulling back the hands of time a bit, there was Garbera's Third Princess Vileena Owell on the other side.

As she headed along the passage through the cliffs, the same as with Orba, many different people were directing their gazes at her. There were some among them who gave deep lamenting sighs. Vileena, who was almost girlishly indifferent to them, was lending her ears to the music that the musicians played as she walked the way leading up to the hall.

"Well, I suppose they show at least some signs of civilization," Theresia, walking next to her, said as she bowed her head in assent.

Feeling the same, Vileena also slightly tucked her jaw and nodded slightly. And then, she added with an afterthought,

"But, princess. Please be discreet with what you say. At most, call them something like 'troglodyte apes bearing wisdom' or 'remnants of ogres that love to kill each other'."

"As long as Theresia's close to me," Vileena laughed, "If it's Mephius, a remote snowfield, or anywhere, I'll surely never get bored."

Theresia, who had been close to her since she was born, had always acted as her guardian. Although her hair was beginning to get mixed with white, if she was in high spirits, she could also use this kind of dangerous jokes.

When they entered the hall, Vileena gave a tactful smile as several nobles of the Mephius Empire approached in order to greet her, and Theresia took an obligatory step backward, nestling up behind her mistress.

Although it was of course not the first time for her to exchange words with the Mephian nobility, it had always been of a belligerent nature. So the shallow manner at which they forcibly put on the air of cultured people sickened her. When the nobles took their leave, Vileena lethargically relaxed her shoulders.

"Even so, they seem to want strangely traditional types for their women. When the first delegation that did the marriage proposal mentioned my pleasure in riding airships, their eyes all became, well, big and round. In Mephius, they're not allowed to ride horses or dragons, and it seems women can't wear clothes that don't cover their legs either."

"Well, then I'm sure the princess looks quite manly to them. I feel sorry for your partner, Prince Gil of Mephius. They value 'pride and history' among the imperial family, but they must accept that Garbera's tomboy princess – the person who will stand next to the heir of their imperial throne – must be made an empress of all people."

"It's mutual, we're two of a kind," Vileena said, giving a laugh that held no joy, as she fixed her hair ornament with her hand. "I may be such a manly tomboy, but the partner I have to keep company is the first prince Gil Mephius, of the Mephius Empire. I have never heard a single good word about him. Even though their delegation spoke well of him, trying to glorify their prince with frantic flattery, it was nothing but a pitiable sight. Because whatever they said sounded hypocritical to the ears, and because it looked like they didn't believe any of it themselves."

Gil Mephius. Although now a youth of seventeen, he was the first heir to the imperial throne, slated to take over the Mephius Empire. This person, who she'd only seen on portraits, was to be Vileena's husband.

They would meet face to face for the first time now. And the next day, in accordance to the Mephian customs, the marriage ritual would be held on the altar atop the valley. Then, on the third day, they would head for the imperial capital of Mephius, where a grand reception was going to be held.

It wasn't only the marriage that would be consummated. More importantly, with this, the peace and alliance between Mephius and Garbera would be established. The battles that had been flourishing over the span of ten years would finally come to an end.

Of course, even Vileena longed for that, but there weren't any good rumours at all relating to the imperial prince that would be her partner. They said he was a coward, not even close to his father – the current emperor, Guhl Mephius – that he hung around with his young friends, partying about night after night, and that he exhibited some eccentric habits.

"They say he's a *fool*," Vileena had declared in front of her father when he'd told her about the engagement.

Originally, a man named Ryucown was to be her fiancé. He was a general with an air carrier under his command. He had dauntless courage and was given credit for performing a most distinguished service in the war against Mephius. And so, his betrothal with the third princess Vileena had been decided during the times of war.

Vileena had also met the person in question. Although, frankly, their first encounter was something so dramatic that even now it was talked about in the country, she was only nine years old back then. When they met again four years later, when their engagement had been arranged, Vileena did not have a proper impression of what kind of man he was supposed to be.

And so, when they met again, Ryucown was an unbelievably shy person, compared to the fierce success stories from the battlefield. He couldn't think of one story to tell the kingdom's princess, and his smile, as if making a mockery of himself, was awkward. She didn't know whether to like him or to hate him. Only that it seemed a suitable argument that their marriage would be for the sake of the whole nation.

However, for several months the war front had fallen into a stalemate. Mephius and Garbera were secretly making progress on peace negotiations. And only two months ago, they decided on betrothing the Crown Prince Gil and Princess Vileena.

Vileena held mixed feelings about it. For over ten years they'd fought with Mephius, and she knew from experience how much it had exhausted the soldiers and their people. Some citizens and local lords had appealed for a resistance to the bitter end but, although there were also some knights among them, they were a minority.

Vileena's father, Ainn Owell the Second, didn't have Guhl Mephius's bold personality. In front of his daughter, he only said the single word, "Please." Vileena had only replied with, "I accept." But she'd known her mother and Theresia were quietly wiping their tears behind her back.

Then, a few days ago, feeling as though her mind and body were being split apart, she went to her favourite grandfather, Jeorg Owell, to say her goodbyes. The proud, commanding princess, who loved horse-riding and airships, whom he even permitted to handle a gun, and who never compromised, had become like a little child in front of her grandfather. She wanted to be forever lifted onto his lap and lean her body against him, so she could listen to the heroic stories he'd always told her.

However, that had been completely brushed aside, and she had to come to this place.

No, one could say it was good that she could protect the memories of her grandfather like this. It was for her country, for her father, and for her grandfather. For them, she had marched into the enemy territory with the fighting spirit of a knight.

Enemy territory.

Indeed, this was the enemy. Until just recently, this was the country they'd crossed swords with. Vileena was within that enemy's territory.

They had killed many people, some of whom she'd even known by face. And of course the opponent thought much of the same thing, but Vileena was not yet mature enough to let bygones be bygones.

"We've arrived."

When Theresia gently whispered into her ear, Vileena calmed down. There were many people of the Mephian nobility staring in their direction. In the middle, stood a young man, wearing white ceremonial clothes.

"That's Mephius's First Prince, Gil Mephius."

"Yes," Vileena said.

Her cheeks were womanly pure, but she was still tense.

The other party also seemed to have noticed, and the fat noble at the prince's side whispered something in his ear. After that, he approached them with a nervous look on his face.

At a glance, Prince Gil didn't look like the feeble-minded man the rumours made him out to be. He had a slender face, but it looked like his body figure was unexpectedly sturdy. If he only proudly threw out his chest, he would look like a fearless, handsome man. However,

That attending noble is sticking so close to him, it's almost as if he has to lead him by the hand. Is he still just a kid?

Of course, she didn't have the slightest idea that he just had the same first impression of her. But to make matters worse, the prince didn't seem to be able to calm down. His eyes wandered here, his eyes wandered there, as if he was indeed a lost child looking for his parents.

While Vileena was having her tendency to gaze at the other person as if fully appraising him, she received a stealthy elbow from Theresia, and hurriedly corrected her expression.

The prince halted his feet before Vileena's presence. Vileena lowered her head, as expected of courtesy, and waited for his greeting. However, she clearly heard a single clearing of the throat, and it didn't sound as if it came from the prince. The fat noble from earlier whispered in a low voice again, and it sounded like he instructed him how to greet her.

At such an occasion, it were the lady's manners to pretend not to notice, of course, and at least not to make an embarrassment out of him, when meeting her marriage partner for the first time, and not just with the two of them.

"Pleased to meet you for the first time, Prince," she said.

Theresia opened her mouth in surprise. Unconcerned, Vileena lightly picked up the hem of her dress with both hands and bowed before him.

"I am the daughter of King Ainn Owell the Second of Garbera, Third Princess Vileena. From here on, I'd love to be better acquainted."

"Ah, yes."

It was the first thing the prince said. And then he hesitantly, and in a small voice, introduced himself, with his words being more faltering than any kind of greeting Vileena had ever heard.

Will this man become my husband?

She had trained her smile, while painstakingly maintaining the slight inclination of her head, extra hard for this day, only to be seen as 'modest'. An anger gushed forth within Vileena's heart.

But on the other hand,

A colour of intense emotions began to flicker in her slightly lowered eyes.

If he's a man like that, I might possibly be able to bend him to my will.

If she was able to manipulate the crown prince, she could eventually be the one pulling the strings in this country.

It's just like grandfather said. This too, is a battle. Without shedding blood, and without taking someone's life.

If it was possible to make him do her will, it might be more profitable to her homeland Garbera than if they'd won the war. Although this was far from a fight with airships or guns, which were her speciality, and she would have to fight in a field that she considered her weak point, Vileena believed that, if she was strongly committed to gain victory, she would certainly find a way.

Although this proved Vileena didn't recognize herself that she would actually be fighting a 'woman's battle', just like she couldn't see the difference between this and a gunfire exchange, at that moment, there was only one emotion burning fiercely within her.

At that time, Theresia, who had been with her since she was a child, was probably the only one who had realized that the meaning behind the smile on Vileena's face had changed. Not knowing the woman who would become his bride hid such frightening ideas within her, Prince Gil of Mephius, still filled with a look of tension, continued talking about irrelevant things.

Chapter 4 – At Seirin Valley

Part 1

As far as Simon Rodloom was concerned, Fedom, the Lord of Birac, showed no signs of a change of heart.

Despite the council having become a more nominal existence due to strengthening of the Imperial household's authority, Simon was still a leading aristocrat. He grasped the movements of the other nobles to some extent, their principles and claims, and also intended to understand their situation.

According to Simon's insights, Fedom was clearly one of the anti-imperial faction.

He had persuaded the emperor, who actually wanted to continue the war with Garbera, and as the leader of the group promoting the peace negotiations, he had built up support for himself amongst the Imperial Court. Although his skills as a leader, as well as his wisdom, were somewhat lacking, he was much better compared to the other group of corrupted nobles.

However, that Fedom was definitely acting strange. Since last night's party – no, ever since they headed out for Seirin Valley – he had for some reason been sticking close to Prince Gil, just like a wet nurse poking her nose into people's business here and there.

Did he say he'd educate the prince, just to raise him into a puppet doing his will?

That thought passed through his mind, but wasn't it a little too late to take such actions now?

Incidentally, it was also related to the prince himself. As far as he knew, Prince Gil and Fedom should have hardly exchanged any words. When the prince hung around with his young friends, Simon had always heard him call the man 'that manipulative wannabe swine' behind his back.

How come he seemed to generously accept Fedom's sudden intimacy or – even worse – seemed to rely on him?

Aside from making sure by meeting with the prince in private, there was a lot of work left for Simon. A delegation from the Principality of Ende had also rushed in for congratulations, although it was unusual that they decided to only a week ago. At first, there had also been talks of Ende and Garbera forming a bond by engaging royal partners, but it had probably been just one of the many things Ende and Garbera had in mind. Simon was pressed to welcome them.

But somewhere else,

“That ungrateful bastard, Orba!”

It was Tarkas, rudely snorting and prowling about in the room.

When he thought of the Mephian noble Fedom’s sudden visit, even if had been so abrupt, he wondered why the man had bought Orba without asking for consent.

“The one who raised him was me! Shit, he was just about to earn his pay as a working swordsman, when of all things he had to be snatched away by some noble…!”

“We do not understand it either, though.”

He had summoned Shique, Gowen and Gilliam, his main swordsmen, at a private room inside the cliffs, established for Tarkas’s use. They were here because he had to change the pairings of the competition due to Orba’s sudden departure.

“So why was it decided that Orba had to suddenly be pulled out? Although that kid may be a good swordsman, he was the so-called spearhead of the games to celebrate the wedding. If he simply wanted to purchase Orba for his abilities, I think they should’ve made him participate in the fights.”

“I would also like to know – that shithead!” Tarkas said. “Even though he was bought by a noble, he could've at least offered himself up for the last battle as a favour. That son of a bitch!”

“Maybe it’s because we were supposed to kill each other. I’ll surely celebrate his new life, but I can’t get used to this feeling, and I’m bothered that he left without a single word.”

“Oh, Gilliam. Does even a man like you get lonely when one of his acquaintances leaves?”

“Shut it, Shique! I just regret that I haven’t settled things with that guy!”

“Well, it can’t be helped that he isn’t here. Let’s consider making some exciting pairings,” Gowen said in order to calm everyone down.

Naturally, he also felt a bit strange lately.

He had no time to figure out what had happened. He had to take a look at the condition of the newcomers Tarkas had bought, and because this was different from the usual procedure, he also had to review every single swordsman.

However, something that faintly weighed on Gowen's mind was whether Orba, who had been looking forward to a future even when his mind and body got beaten down, was now living in that very same future.

While people were busily moving about around him, former gladiator Orba seemed to have time to spare, being practically left on his own. Being tasked as a body double was fine, but he couldn't talk unless Fedom whispered the words to him, like ventriloquism.

It's strange...

These nobles had snatched away his brother to be a soldier. Not only had they abandoned their village but, of all things, the nobility had aimed its blades at its own citizens and had taken Alice away, causing him to fall into a life of slavery and making him wear that mask.

It might be because of a whim of fate, but none other than one of those Mephian nobles suddenly plucked Orba out of his life of slavery and ordered him to become a substitute for one of leading figures in the imperial family.

Theft, extortion and illegal gun trading – having lived off sipping water from the gutter, he couldn't help but think he was a laughingstock for the crown prince. Although the fact that he still didn't know what another day might bring was similar to being a slave.

However – being on the other side of those black plastered streets – perhaps now he could expect to find one spot, yes, just one spot of light. As the prince's body double, he'd have the opportunity to come in contact with leading figures, other than Fedom of course. It wouldn't be so strange to find the one who burned down his village – General Oubary – among them.

Although Orba had been hit on his head back then and had only seen him for a moment with a dazed glance, for all those two years he'd been a sword-slave, he hadn't forgotten his face for even a day. Even now it vividly came back to him in his mind.

"Gil-sama."

If we meet again.

I wonder what I should do then.

The boy swordsman, who had his mask removed, continued sinking in ceaseless thoughts. He would think of a way to give the guy the most miserable death possible, as long as it was conceivable in this world. Besides, if he was able to meet up with Oubary, he could trace back the lines to the time he got separated from Alice and his mother. Also, although he himself did not expect too much of it – for he couldn't wish for the unimaginable over and over again and virtually hope for a miracle – if he found other people recruited as soldiers by Oubary, they might know something about his brother Roan's whereabouts.

"Gil-sama, Prince. Prince Gil!"

"Eh?"

Being spoken to in such a firm voice, Orba looked to his side.

Princess Vileena was sitting at a distance not too far from him. She was in front of the altar, at the place where the valley was at its deepest, looking out over the area. Only Vileena and Orba were sitting in chairs, with a stalwart group of soldiers surrounding them, while at the front of the altar, priests were chanting hymns of prayer and blessing.

"What is it you're thinking of?"

"Nothing," Orba replied curtly.

It wasn't possible for Fedom to be around him during the ceremony, so he'd told him to 'say nothing' in the meantime. Turning his face forward, he pretended to be concentrating on the ceremony.

"That's a lie," Vileena decided, also in a curt manner.

What…? A lie?

The timing was so excellent that Orba couldn't ignore it, and he again gave the princess of the Kingdom of Garbera a glance.

She was again wearing a dress, but a different one from yesterday's party, and she wore an informal tiara on her head. This close, it surprised him. Although she seemed like only a little girl the first time they met face to face, when she turned aside with a serious look every once in a while, she looked really mature.

He wondered if it was because of her clear-cut features, although Orba thought her face looked much like a doll's. At the moment, except for being from a different birth,

she seemed almost the same as Orba. Only moving when told to, and only speaking when told to by someone else.

Indeed, when he thought about it, that was what this wedding was all about. Even though she was only fourteen years old, in contrast to her true wishes, she had to become the wife of a man she only first met yesterday, and was of a former enemy country to boot. Although he couldn't get himself to feel sympathy for someone like her, who was born into a royal family, she seemed to have various hardships of her own as well.

So, it's the same for everyone.

He suddenly remembered that voice.

– Nobody knows what kind of person he'll be. Everybody longs for a world they don't know, and pursue a meaning in life for which they've been born – even if he's a priest, or royalty.

It was just like Roan said, Orba groaned deep inside.

"You really *are* lost in thought."

When she once again spoke to him out of the blue, Orba impolitely replied with the words,

"So what?"

Vileena chuckled.

"For quite a while, I thought you had frightening eyes at times, but now you seem to smile, thinking of something pleasant. Please tell me, you who are about to become my husband – what is it that troubles you on such a fine day, and what on earth is this matter you can't help but remember?"

The ceremony went on. They had grilled a dragon they just killed this morning, and while they scattered the bones across the base of the valley, the priests chanted their prayers. They called for the souls of the dragons that once ruled this planet to protect the country's prosperity.

"Could it be that the Ryuujin, if they come back, may not necessarily give this place their blessings?"

Back when humankind landed on this planet, the dragons only roamed the fields and thought of nothing but filling their stomachs, in short, they had degenerated to being on the same level as beasts.

However, they excavated the ruins of enormous cities and artefacts of unknown purpose here and there on the planet, and there also seemed to be traces of a magical civilization that possibly used some form of *ether*[8]. Humankind was able to wield their first 'magic', Zodias, after a while, and this blessing of wisdom was said to have all been obtained from these dragons' ruins. It was believed that the ancient dragons formed the intelligent body that once governed this planet, probably thousands of years before humankind ultimately arrived.

The custom to call those dragons of old 'Dragon Gods' or 'Ryuujin' was particularly Mephian, and there was a time it had been the religious faith in all of the country. Although it was now a mere shadow of its former self, for important rituals like these, the priest who presided over the ceremony was selected and summoned from one of the tribes of nomads living in the area near the Mephian border, where the roots of the Ryuujin Faith lay.

"Like I said, it's nothing."

Again, Orba briefly ended the conversation.

He had received a brief explanation from the page, Dinn, concerning the history of the Ryuujin Faith, but naturally he didn't feel too strongly about it. So, he wasn't able to tell whether Vileena had been joking or not.

If the real prince's and this girl's relations grows awkward after this, I won't be taking responsibility for it, Fedom-sama.

On the other hand, Vileena finally gave a sigh, getting lost in her own thoughts. For Garbera, the dragons having a civilization equal to or greater than that of the humans in the past was viewed upon as nothing more than a 'dragon god' legend. Therefore she could not experience this ceremony as something sacred. And although she had gotten carelessly and completely bored, when she glanced at the person next to her, Prince Gil – the one who would become her husband when this ceremony was finally over – she couldn't help but be distracted. So, to slightly stave off her boredom, she tried to tease him a little. But, possibly revealing his 'true character', although she tried her best to look like a lady, the prince was genuinely blunt. Not only that, his brief way of talking really got on her nerves.

She wondered if it was because he was embarrassed. During last night's party, she hadn't caught wind of his behaviour being resentful against women either. But when she thought he might be a bit like Ryucown, Vileena felt offended by herself. There was no way the bravest general of Garbera resembled someone who was rumoured to be a complete 'retard' here in Mephius.

[8] It's called 'ether', but the author uses the characters for 'Elementary' and 'Magic'.

In any case, this is the same thing as war. To fool the enemy, I have to keep up the pace in this place.

Vileena maintained her smile, pretending not to be offended. It would be best if the prince fell madly in love with her. However, she didn't know whether it would work out that way if he already had some love affair with another girl. Anyway, it wouldn't be a problem if she just kept smiling.

Grandfather also told me that he loved my smiling face above all. So in that case, I shouldn't be mistaken.

The priests' tedious prayers would be over soon, and then the sword-slave battles would finally take place.

It was said to be part of the ceremony that, when the dragon bones have turned to ash and are poured over the ground, the lifeblood of men is given. Nevertheless, what they did was hardly any different from your everyday gladiator battles. The only difference was that the introductory remarks were slightly more formal than usual. The arena, a levelled ground at the bottom of the valley with only some pillars staked into the earth, was even simpler than the usual.

There, the gladiators were standing in rows to the east and west sides. Orba recognized Tarkas, Gowen, and a lot of other faces he knew, and an unusually boyish smile appeared on his face.

I doubt those guys would even imagine I'm right here.

Although Tarkas was probably furious about him having left so suddenly, exactly because it happened so soon, it wouldn't occur to him that he'd be looking down from such a high position.

Vileena, on the other hand, despite having been informed of this earlier, was looking on with gloomy thoughts about slaves having to kill each other hereafter. There was no slavery in Garbera, which was the main reason they spoke ill of Mephius as a country of barbarians.

Unsatisfied with the war, have they wilfully made a show of looking down on slaves and forcing them to kill each other?

When the divination was over, the first group of people stepped forward. The movements of the gladiators were somewhat awkward, but perhaps it was because of the unfamiliar environment up until the end of the first round, namely, until the loser was turned into a sprawled corpse on the ground.

In Garbera and Ende, with restrictions on slave companies active in the entertainment industry, there wasn't an opportunity to see a gladiator fight. So, although the envoys had been prejudiced at first, and although it looked like they might have been enraged as the sound of clashing swords ran about, before long, they ended up bending over the stands, clenching their fists tight, giving cheers along with the people of Mephius, and started giving their applause.

Vileena soon got sick of it. Then, thinking of His Lordship, she again peeked to her side. When she saw a huge, grinning smile on his face, Vileena again felt a renewed disappointment appear. No matter how she looked at it, he clearly enjoyed seeing them kill each other from the bottom of his heart. She had assumed that he would like it, but not to this extent.

Suddenly, she was no longer able to restrain her feelings. The once disdainful feelings for her partner had turned into emotional disgust. It all happened so sudden, and she herself was actually quite perplexed. She was again reminded of how she, until just now, had to constantly try to subdue her emotions. Even though she was the princess of a country who had said she would give priority to her own nation before herself, she was only fourteen years old.

I can't, I can't!

Vileena strongly clutched her fists in her lap.

This, too, is a battle. This, too, is a trial, Vileena. My body was given a push in the back and sent forward. I can't let my spirit lose its strength like this.

Shique stepped forward at the arena. The cheers concentrated on this unique gladiator, with a decadent white-painted face. Looking at his opponent, however… Orba raised his eyebrows.

He's…

For some reason, it was one of the newcomers Tarkas had hired in his good mood. Taking Shique's skills into consideration, it was obvious this opponent wasn't suitably matched. Even if he was able to liven up the battle, Tarkas had struck a bad deal. This would be over in an instant.

Shique readied his trademark dual swords. Both were single-bladed swords of middle length. The newcomer nervously stood ready on the other side. This would be over within the blink of an eye – or so Orba thought at the time.

But while he thought this, he heard a loud rumbling through the ground, which practically shook violently under his feet. During that lapse in time, a dense cloud of dust swelled up on the other side of the arena.

Those soldiers who looked up at the dust, towards whatever it was, were the first to fall victim. Although they'd gathered around the arena carrying spears and guns, they also hadn't expected such a sudden occurrence, and were crushed to death underneath a dragon's forelegs. As soon as the clots of blood painted the ground bright red, a scaled dragon, tinged with slime here and there, emerged from the cloud of dust. The huge-shaped mass was basically stepping forward.

It was a large-type dragon, Sozos. Chains were supposed to be tied to its feet and naturally it should have also be locked up in a cage, but the dragon had become a freed creature, and even more of them appeared all at once.

"Wh-Whaahh!!"

One soldier, stunned by the death of his colleagues, fired his readied gun. The moment he removed his aim, a sharp claw about three times his height swung down on his body and he immediately splattered into a heap of flesh on the ground. Then the other soldiers who were near him, shrieked like women, dropped their guns, and started running away. Their screams and shouts began to sound much like the rumbling in the ground.

"W-What, what's going on?"

"Why are the dragons on a rampage?"

A large number of people started bellowing at each other underneath their tents. The dragons that were to be used by the gladiators had broken through their cages and were rampaging about. There were some people who picked up swords and guns and headed for the guards, some who ran as fast as they could, and some who spread instructions to their subordinates – mixed in with a lot of other people.

Orba stood up from his chair. For a moment he couldn't see Shique's figure from under the cover of the dust cloud. Then one of the gladiators, the one who was the next to go, got kicked hard by a Baian. And another, someone from the Tarkas Group who tried to recklessly lunge at their bellies, got trampled under a Sozos.

Then, he spotted a single, small silhouette among those dragons. It was Hou Ran. She was probably running around in tears trying to stop the dragons. There were several times when she barely escaped being kicked around by the dragons' legs.

Lend me a gun.

Orba came close to shouting those words and taking a rifle from one of the guards. However, he was interrupted halfway as he suddenly he felt a sharp pain at a certain spot on his forehead.

"Ah!"

Guided by impulse and not by reason, Orba quickly concealed his body under the table. Something was flying overhead, high in the sky, at a great speed. Someone with the intent to kill. As it took form, he had a feeling that it was aiming for the ground.

A sniper!

Blended in with the sound of the dragon's feet, the raised screams of the people, and the angry voices, was most definitely the sound of a rifle's gunshot that rattled his eardrums.

Part 2

In the blink of an eye, the arena down below was covered in a cloud of dust. Seeing the turmoil in front of her, which was much like a battlefield, Vileena jumped out of her seat.

Able to see the rampaging dragons and the many people falling victim to them, her eyes were reflexively trying to look for an airship. If she could cut in from the sky, she might be able to draw the dragons' attention. There certainly had to be an old-type scouting ship among the number of crafts in the Mephian defence force.

"Hey, you, don't come any further!"

"How rude, out of all the people that came here, just who – wahh!"

A disturbance occurred among the guards who were standing in an organized line. It wasn't because of the dragons' disturbance. There was a man who was running away, aiming straight for them, and although two soldiers tried to hold him back, they were cut down in no time.

Who the—!?

She meant to speak, but a lump of saliva got caught in her throat. Getting a glimpse of the bloodied sword, she recognized him as the man that should have been fighting in the arena just now. The Garberan princess barely dodged a single blow

swung down from the side. However, tripping over the hem of her long dress, she fell down.

The other guards, distracted by the rampaging dragons, were moving about all over the place. Vileena nimbly rolled over on the ground and snatched a gun from the waist of a soldier who'd been cut down. Sparks jumped out before her. The steel blade had dug into the ground but, within a short interval, he swung it down again.

Vileena's vision was fixed on the point of the sword, as if she just fallen to the brink of the dark shadow of death. Then, suddenly, a single sword came down from the side, stopping the blow.

"Your opponent is me."

The words came from behind the man – it was the gladiator who had been fighting him a while ago. His red lips formed into a mysterious smile.

"As soon as the dragons appeared, you headed straight this way. Who are you?"

"Bastard!"

The man shouted in a hoarse voice, without releasing his grip, he rotated his body and pulled out a dagger from his waist. With a movement quick enough to stir up a wind, he aimed for the gladiator's chest. However, that gladiator – Shique – tilted his shoulders. He swept aside the dagger with his other sword, and thrust his first sword into the man's chest.

When the man collapsed in front of her with a surprised look in his eyes, Vileena heaved a sigh.

An assassin…

It felt like cold hands had taken a hold on her heart. And then, suddenly realizing the situation, she looked over at Prince Gil's side. He was jumbled together with several other people, hiding under a table. Only his face peeped out, quietly observing the state of his surroundings. Although his safety was most definitely important, it couldn't be helped that her sense of disappointment in him only grew. When his fiancée had been attacked just now, this man had been quivering all by himself.

Then Vileena accidentally got startled, because Gil looked her way. There was not a hint of fear in his eyes, rather…

"Princess, get over here and lie down," Gil – although, it was of course actually Orba – suddenly said.

He half-forcingly pulled at a bewildered Vileena's arm and, after he made her lie down on her stomach like him, called out Shique's name. The gladiator froze over with genuine surprise. Seeing him so flabbergasted, Orba was driven by the urge to make a joke, despite the current situation.

"I'm a fan of yours," he said. He then immediately gave a serious look. "The dragons are only a diversion. There must be a sniper aiming for us here. Find out where he is."

"Ha, hahah..."

Suddenly being spoken to in person by the prince of his country, although he was basically given an order, even baffled Shique. Orba, however, continued without concern anyway.

"Also inform Gowen to let anyone who can fight to lend a hand."

Shique started running, quick to come to action, although he turned his head every now and then. He started running past the dragons that were going mad with blood and devouring several people. While making sure to guard his back, Orba peeked out from under the table. And immediately drew back in again. He repeated the movement several times, until a gunshot also reached Vileena's ears for the first time.

A lure?

She realized that thought with a flash. He'd purposely exposed his body like that to invite the enemy's gunfire, so that the gladiator named Shique could learn of the enemy's position. This prince – just what was his true face?

A Sozos climbed up through the mayhem in the valley and was approaching their location.

"Your Highness, Princess! This way!"

Two men rushed in among the guards. Finally someone who acted in the right state of mind had come for them. Orba also decided it was a good time to leave. He stood up and led Vileena by the hand. She didn't go against him and followed suit.

Orba was running. Maybe he had expected something like this to happen, because he had to act as a double. But right now, he didn't have the time to think of that. Although he was worried about the safety of the gladiators, Orba decided that, considering that the gunshots had ceased, they were probably all right.

Orba and Vileena, holding each other's hands, looked over their shoulders several times, as they rushed into a cave underneath the cliffs, led by the soldiers.

"Get into this hidden passage for now. It leads to the other side of the cliffs."

When the soldier struck one of the pillars in the cave with his fist, the side of the steep cliff wall rotated, opening a space where only one person could pass.

"Go, hurry," they urged the princess on.

The moment Vileena's body was pushed inside, the wall somehow rotated again behind her.

"Huh?"

She raised her voice and turned her back when there was only darkness in front of her. There wasn't a single lamp inside the cave, and although she looked for a switch, she couldn't find it in the hidden passage. Furthermore, she heard voices on the other side of the wall in some kind of argument.

Surely the enemy hadn't planned an ambush? – she soon thought.

"Princess Vileena!"

A voice called out to her from behind. Again there were two soldiers in armour, and came from the other side of the passage carrying lamps. However, they weren't dressed in Mephian gear.

"Princess, make haste over here. A ship is coming to pick you up."

"Ship? What do you mean by ship?"

"It's a ship that has come to take you away from these savage lands, to a place more suitable for someone of your noble lineage."

"You guys…"

While the Princess Vileena was struck with a certain foreboding feeling, something like a gunshot roared from the other side of the thick wall.

It was in the instant Vileena entered the hidden passage.

"Hey, what's going on!?"

Several soldiers who seemed to be guarding the inside of the cliffs came their way. Then one of the soldiers who had guided Orba quickly struck the pillar again, leaving Vileena alone in the passage she'd entered.

"*We* don't know either. But it's going well."

As he spoke, he pulled and fired a gun from his back.

Almost at the same time as the guard up front collapsed with a spray of blood, the other soldier was about to lunge into their flanks with a drawn sword. Without having the time to accept the sudden challenge, one soldier, and yet another one, got cut down.

Orba was standing with his back against the wall, watching over this sudden bewildering development. This didn't look like some internal discord. With the thought that Vileena was in the hidden passage all alone, it was likely that the soldiers who had guided Orba here were involved with the dragon rampage and the sniping.

Orba gently leaned over, and took a sword from a fallen soldier. He concealed it behind his back for the time being, as the battle before him ended.

"Worthless," the soldier who'd fired the gun said and turned around to face Orba. "What should we do with the prince here?"

"Let's keep him hostage. Get over here, you!"

The soldier holding the sword held out his hand. It was the same hand that belonged to the one who, due to the element of surprise, had killed six soldiers in an instant. Not wearing a helmet, his face was beaming with haughtiness.

"W-Who… are you people?"

Trembling, Orba edged sideways with his back against the wall. The two had sneers on their faces, covered with their victims' blood.

"Hmph, I didn't know the prince of the Great Imperial Dynasty was this pathetic. After all, he can't do a thing without his many retainers by his side."

"A guy like this would become the Vileena-sama's husband? Ridiculous. He'd sully Garbera's prestigious blood. Now, Prince Halfwit of Mephius, come!"

Orba screamed and ran away from the man's outstretched arm.

"I don't have time to play. Now, if you don't come quickly."

As the soldier chased after him with mocking laughter, Orba promptly turned around, and cut him right up front with the sword he'd been hiding. Leaving a trail of blood and an accompanying scream, he jumped over his fallen opponent and quickly stabbed at shoulder of the flustered man holding the gun.

"B-Bastard."

He drove the pommel of his sword into the man's face, who collapsed onto his knees and fainted.

Then, from the opposite side of the cave, other guardsmen from Mephius showed up. They'd probably caught the sounds of the disturbance. Orba quickly explained to them the circumstances – and ordered them to bind up the unconscious enemies. After that, he urged them to open up the hidden passage, but it took him quite some time and effort because the soldier in charge wasn't there.

I hate enemies who stay hidden and gather knowledge.

Time was precious. Without fully knowing the reason behind his impatience, Orba privately clicked his tongue.

Several minutes after Vileena had disappeared into the hidden passage, they finally opened the door.

The first thing Orba heard was the sound of men and a woman struggling with each other.

As expected, if he could say so, men were holding Vileena on both sides and trying to drag her along through the narrow cave passage.

"Unhand me, you insolents!"

Vileena's voice left the trail of an echo throughout the narrow cave. The Mephian guardsmen set out ahead of Orba.

"Who's there? Where are you taking the princess?"

"Stupid Mephian savages! Don't you get it!?"

As the enemy soldier answered back, he pulled out a pistol. The Mephian soldier was about to counter-attack immediately, but,

"Wait, you'll hit the princess!"

Orba took command as he tried to lay low. In that instant, suddenly something unbelievable occurred.

Having lost her restraints on one side from the man holding the gun, Vileena lightly jumped up and raised one foot from her dress. Taking in the brunt of the force from her foot, the gun dropped from the soldier's hand. Quickly recovering from his initial shock, Orba made a quick decision.

"Now—! Don't use guns, charge!"

In response to Orba's orders, the soldiers armed themselves with swords and spears and rushed into the other party.

Although one of them showed signs of fighting back, in the blink of an eye he was overwhelmed by the Mephian force.

"Draw back, draw back!"

Eventually they commenced their escape, leaving the princess in place.

The Mephian soldiers raised cries of war and chased after them, but it was a narrow cave after all. One Garberan soldier came to a halt and started rapidly firing at them, making them lose their joint effort as they had to take cover here and there. Providing cover for his allies thus, when his bullets inevitably ran out, he removed a knife from his pocket, jabbed it into his own neck, and finished himself off.

Orba hadn't witnessed these details to the very end. The rest was an issue between Mephius and Garbera, where he himself was unrelated. Aside from that, the safety of the people he knew weighed on his mind and he followed the road all the way back through the cave.

When he came back, the disturbance had settled a bit. The dragons were lying with their long necks on the ground, or leaning against the huge slopes in the valley, spewing out blood. They had sunk beneath the gunfire of the sword-slaves, including Gowen, and the artillery the Mephian soldiers had brought out. Having played quite an active role, Gilliam and Shique's swords were wet with vast amounts of blood, and their muscles heaved along with rough breaths.

However, the strained look didn't leave their faces, rather, their looks were coated with a preparedness for death. This was hardly surprising, because the guns the Mephian soldiers had set up were currently pointing in the direction of the sword-slaves.

"What's the meaning of this, Tarkas!?" a red-faced Fedom berated Tarkas.

The dragons that had suddenly gone on a rampage had been brought along by the Tarkas Group, and several people had witnessed some of the sword-slaves pointing their swords at Gil and Vileena. Although Tarkas had a pale face and desperately told him he 'didn't know either', Fedom didn't have the ears to hear it. If he would have had a gun in his hands, he would've likely used it to shoot Tarkas on the spot.

Most of the sword-slaves were forced to disarm themselves, and had to cross both arms over their heads. However, there was confusion on the faces of even the guards pointing their guns. After all, the ones who'd fought back against the dragons first were none other than those slaves.

Still shrouded with dust, the smell of earth and gunfire abundant, there was confusion in the air.

"Wait!"

Orba stepped forward. The surprised soldiers holding the guns made way. Fedom glanced over at Orba and twisted the corners of his mouth.

"What? When you butt in like this—"

"Who are you speaking to? Don't you recognize me, Fedom?"

Shutting his mouth with a start, Fedom gave him a disgruntled look. Seeing such a thing for the first time, Tarkas snickered.

"This man may be involved in a country-wide conspiracy. Maybe someone took advantage of him, right? I believe that the Mephians who hired these people without knowing a thing are also responsible. But we can't say who. If I see anyone shift his responsibility and execute even one of these sword-slaves without permission, I will have his head – I'll take it off with my— *our* sword!"[9]

"I agree."

Turning around, Orba raised his eyebrows in surprise. Vileena came walking up to them. She seemed to be wavering a little, but if you took into account the mayhem from a little while ago, you could say she was carrying herself rather firmly.

"Ah, princess!"

Her maid Theresia rushed over to her, probably having been worried about her all this time, and Vileena greeted her with a thin smile.

[9] Orba actually corrects himself, using 余 (*yo*), a more dignified way of saying 'I', instead of his usual おれ (*ore*). Seeing as there's no better way to translate this correctly in English, the majestic plural is used here instead.

"Even though it was a gladiator that aimed for my life, the one that rescued me was the gladiator over there. We won't be able to come to a simple conclusion with the current circumstances, will we?"

Although her dress was covered with sand, her face bore countless beads of sweat, and her braided hair had become frayed here and there, her pupils were filled with a clear purpose.

Straight after such a commotion…

Instead of being panicked, she was analysing things calmly. Until some time ago, he'd only seen this girl as a puppet, but it was only after she was injured and knocked about, that it roused his flesh and blood, and Orba actually felt that she was a person with the same beliefs as he had.

"Besides," the foreign princess suddenly cast down her eyes and gnashed her teeth. "They were probably our Garbera's— General Ryucown's subordinates."

That evening, Orba was in a single room inside the cliffs. It was the same room he'd spent his time in yesterday, as it was made appropriate for the Imperial Family to stay in.

While he didn't grasp the full story behind the situation, they had judged it too dangerous to go back to a city in Mephian territory with only themselves for now. With their military power currently forming a line of defence in the valley, they were waiting for reinforcements to arrive from the city.

Of course, several people from Garbera, including Vileena, and the delegation from Ende were being confined in the valley as well. At any rate, the atmosphere had gotten complicated.

The moment the Mephian soldiers, who had chased the enemy down the hidden passage, had slipped out to the valley on the other side, they'd witnessed a dragonstone ship flying up into the air. It was a high-speed cruiser that could carry about ten people, and it had probably been waiting on the other side of the cliffs until just a while earlier. So they might have been planning to take Vileena?

Vileena had said these were 'Ryucown's actions'.

Ryucown was a great warrior from Garbera. Even Orba knew his name. It seemed only obvious to claim that this chain of disturbances was plotted by Garbera.

However…

Orba started thinking it over. If that *had* been Garbera's doing, there were too many unnatural aspects.

"Gil-sama? Gil-sama!"

He was a little late to react to the voice calling out to him. The page, Dinn, had just placed several wine bottles and three glasses on the table. It was these items that told Orba everything.

"You're still a little late in noticing, aren't you?"

"I've never been called by that name, you know?" Orba said, shrugging his shoulders. "Names aside, the 'sama' doesn't sit well either. It's awkward. You don't have to overdo it when there's no one else around."

"No. Anyone can keep an eye out, and you never know who's straining his ears. Besides, I'm not such a skilled person either. So I'm not confident I can change my behaviour when it really matters if I don't regularly keep calling you Prince Gil. You too. If you don't get used to it – if you don't constantly behave like a prince should – you might expose yourself when push comes to shove."

The still twelve, thirteen-year-old boy answered, puffing up with a noble's pride.

"Get used to it, huh?" Orba said, as he noticed the full-scale window that reached from the floor to the ceiling.

Because the curtains were drawn, he couldn't look out over the valley. While the balcony was packed with soldiers on guard, because the balcony itself protruded directly from the cliff, he didn't have to worry that they could hear their conversation.

That was when he remembered, and Orba smiled, thinking back. When Tarkas had been accused by Fedom, he'd offered some timely help, and afterwards, Tarkas had bowed over to him in gratitude many times over. He would never forget that hapless, tear-filled face for the rest of his life.

"Seeing the number of glasses, who are the guests coming over?"

Just when he was about to answer, the soldier guarding the other side of the door informed them he had visitors.

"Let them in."

Being flanked by two soldiers on the left and right, two people came in that Orba had ordered to call over some time ago.

Entering quite timidly, probably due to surprise and nervousness, were the person in charge of training sword-slaves, Gowen, and the gladiator, Shique.

Part 3

"Thank you for coming."

Speaking up first, Orba acknowledged the two as they came into the room. Although he displayed a princely thin smile, naturally, in his heart, he couldn't help but find their unusually abashed behaviour amusing. The normally fearless Gowen fumbled muttered words of greeting out of his mouth, which he could barely hear, and Shique kept staring around in wonder.

He realized that, most likely, they'd been like this ever since receiving an 'invitation from the prince', and Orba had a hard time resisting the urge to burst out laughing.

Dinn was also equally surprised. He had thought either Fedom or another prominent Mephian figure would come in.

"Wait – what's the meaning of this? I can't have you inviting gladiators without permission. If Fedom-sama finds out—"

"*I'm* the prince, right? Can't I do as I please? Or am I not allowed to talk with somebody without your approval?"

As he brought up again their earlier conversation about behaving like a prince at all times, Dinn couldn't give a reply. By Orba's command, he helplessly poured wine into their glasses and treated the two visitors to a drink.

"These guys have worked well as sword-slaves. If it wasn't for their efforts, I might not have been able to pick up this cup. We should hail them as national heroes!"

He raised his hand to put glasses together, the two nervously joined in. Enjoying his companions' reactions, Orba slightly sipped his drink. It was essentially not so strong.

'Prince Gil' didn't quite seem to go onto the main subject, even though his guests grew more uncomfortable, so Shique finally broke the ice. It looked like he unexpectedly had more guts than Gowen in this kind of situation.

"Although I thought it strange that you spoke to me back then, how come you are f-familiar with our names?"

"You said you're a fan," Gowen said. "B-But I haven't fought in the arena myself these past several years. Even back when I was a gladiator, I don't remember having any fights to leave such a mark. So, really, where Your Highness learned the name of someone like me…"

"Really, I've known," Orba said, purposely grimacing. "Is it something so inconvenient that I know your names? Or does an outrageous thing, like a prince indulging himself in gladiator fights, go against your conscience?"

"N-No, never!"

"No, never mind. Drop it. I'll give the instructions later."

Although he didn't know what these instructions were, Gowen's face stiffened and Shique frantically took a step forward.

"Please forgive us, Your Highness. We are but lowly gladiators. We're not used to a place like this, let alone know the proper etiquette when talking to people of royalty. We barely even know one language… If we have in some way offended you…"

Orba kept staring at the flustered Shique with cold eyes, but then,

"Kuh…"

Finally, he couldn't bear it any longer and sputtered a laugh. He took another shot, and then Orba started clutching his stomach, laughing loudly. The two stared blankly at him.

Dinn turned pale, and kept rebuking him, saying "Prince, Prince!". However Orba said, "Who's this prince!?", wiping the tears from his face and laughing once more.

"You still haven't found out, Gowen? This is so unlike you! So you're quicker with the sword than with words?"

Taking a smallsword hanging on the wall, he thrust it out right in front of Gowen's eyes.

"Although I haven't used it in the arena many times, it was you who taught me the basics of using a smallsword. Show refinement in your posture, strain your upper arms, but keep it supple from the elbow down – isn't that so?"

He lightly thrust out the tip of his sword in a dance, performing his steps around Gowen. Shique then raised his voice in surprise. Orba gave him a wink, with a smirk on his face.

“Could it be – no, but – although his voice is quite similar… n-no, but…”

Orba took one step forward, aiming for Shique, who couldn’t seem to reach a decision. Shique easily moved his face away from the sword’s tip, swinging through the air. He took a step back on reflex.

“Will you allow me to scar your face? So it’ll become a bond between me and you?” Orba said, grinning. Instead of Shique, who was moving his white throat, gulping up and down, Gowen raised his voice.

“Orba!?” he shouted recklessly.

The two sat at the table, taking in the shock, and it looked like not all doubts had been completely cleared away. They listened in astonishment as Orba explained how things had gotten this way. No one interrupted him in the meantime, and Dinn continued serving the three at the table with a half-sulky attitude.

“Hrm,” Gowen grunted. “I’ve been alive for many years and haven’t heard such an odd thing. But, without the mask, your face really does resemble the prince’s. Honestly, I already thought he was quite young, but didn’t think it was this much.”

“I thought about the same,” Shique said, having completely reverted back to his normal attitude. “Better yet, aren’t you more of a handsome man like this?”

Gowen shook his head.

“But is it all right to be so open about this with us? Isn’t this a state secret?”

“It's 'not' all right,” Orba quickly said. “But if I pretend to be a prince all on my own, I won’t have any breathing space, right? I thought at least you’d be able to keep your mouths shut.”

“Ohh?”

“What’s with those eyes?”

Receiving a squinted look from Shique, Orba uncomfortably turned his head to the side.

"Well, never mind. You'll get used to my face."

"No, that's not it. Orba, it's not that the mask's been removed. Something in the atmosphere has changed, you know?"

"The atmosphere?"

"The gladiator in you, somehow, seems to have been crushed by something 'invisible' to the eye, yet your eyes seem to constantly be shining. While, among the gladiators who are mostly ruffians, you were apparently seen as some sort of dangerous person. You gave 'em the chills. Now, however, even if there's no reason for it, part of you seems to have completely lightened up."

"Though, posing as the crown prince, I seem to carry this country's weight on my back? You're taking Mephius rather lightly."

"Even so," Shique said with a puzzling smile.

Strangely feeling like he was being treated like a child, Orba started to get a little irritated.

"Anyhow," Gowen interjected. "If you've been trained as a body double before the wedding, does that mean they already expected a surprise attack like today on Mephius?"

Shique also turned serious and shook his head.

"That seems a little bit too strange, right? All of the Mephian soldiers were taken by surprise and were hardly able to deal with it. If the prince… I mean, Orba, hadn't given those orders, we would've stayed in the confusion too, and both the prince and the princess could have been killed by the sniper, right?"

As expected from a swordsman with this much experience, he took a good look at the situation. Orba held out the wine bottle to Gowen, who had drained his cup.

"Ah."

Raising his voice, Gowen gave a forced smile. He still was a little uneasy about this situation.

"Weren't there any signs that Tarkas knew something?"

"N-Nah. He seems to persist that he didn't know or was aware, but… that man isn't the type to put on a false show. I fear it's likely that he truly doesn't know anything at all."

"But the ones who were about to kill Princess Vileena, and shoot the two of you, were the newcomers that Tarkas had brought in. If I'd at least kept one of them alive…"

Shique curled his red lips. But he couldn't have expected to arrest his opponents in the middle of the melee. There was only the one swordsman whom Orba had hit unconscious and tied up. Right now he was being interrogated, or possibly in the midst of torture.

"And Hou Ran? She's so good at handling the dragons, if it's her, she should know something about that rampage."

"They say they're questioning her about the drugs. Although it seemed that she let one of the newcomers take care of the dragons, it has credibility. But I've gotten a better opinion of Tarkas. Because she comes from a tribe of the Ryuujin Faith, and yet came to like handling the dragons, she was the number one person to doubt. And even though the provincial council finds it to be obvious that she applied the drugs, he continues to keep sticking up for Hou Ran."

"So, when it comes to it, Tarkas can be a good guy?"

"According to Tarkas, after he was to be the presenting gladiatorial group, he was approached by a merchant who offered considerable financial support. Apparently, he'd jumped in without a second thought, because the Tarkas Group could then somehow carry that load on its own. He claims he had to take in those 'newcomers' as a trade-off."

"So *that* guy's pulling the strings? But if he had to lay out a lot of money only for those newcomers, he must likely be on a short list of names here in Mephius, right?"

"That's…" Gowen said, having regained his usual calmness. "If only it were so. Whether it's a true or not, any mention of this 'person' is only coming from Tarkas's mouth. Nevertheless, you could say it was a bold cooperation, but there's no clear evidence to catch him by the tail. It's fruitless anyway. This obviously won't be any ordinary foe. You can conclude that something of a larger scale is behind this."

"For example, the Garbera Kingdom?" Shique asked.

"I believe there's no doubt Garbera's involved."

Orba chose his words carefully.

The soldiers he'd personally faced in the hidden passage, clearly held feelings of love and respect for Princess Vileena. However, that was also why it was such a baffling issue. According to Shique, it was likely that not only Orba, but also the princess, was about to be killed back then. There was no question that those people, who had been planning to help the princess get back home, wouldn't try to get her killed.

Gowen cocked his head in thought.

"It's not entirely unlikely that Ende was about to exact revenge on Mephius and Garbera either. They too, could bear a grudge for the alliance they once wanted to form with Garbera, being called of all. Most of all, if these two countries become allies, Ende would be the first to get into danger."

"Aren't you jumping to conclusions now? If that's the case, instead, it's like virtually giving us a justification to attack Ende."

"You're right," Orba agreed. "Especially if both royals get killed, the momentum will be terrible. Until yesterday, Mephius and Garbera were mutual enemies, but then they will join hands for a firmer cooperation to thrust the sword of revenge at Ende."

"Oh. Such a princely speech, huh?"

"Shut it."

Suddenly, it grew noisy near the room's entrance, and the atmosphere was again about to become strained.

It looked like the palace guards had prevented someone from entering the room. In an instant, Gowen and the rest prepared themselves, as if an enemy was about to break in.

"I'm sorry. Will you please go back to your rooms?"

Hearing the guards' polite words, Orba spoke up without batting an eyelid.

"Dinn, let them in."

"Prince. On your own accord, again…"

"It's okay. If you want, you can go ahead and reveal my social status."

"If I do, you will be hanged!" he said in complaint, although it was the same for all who were already inside. Dinn sighed and obeyed his orders. And although Dinn felt gloomy when he gave them permission to enter the room, he took a startled step back when the door opened.

Watching the ones who entered, Gowen and the rest hurriedly sat up straight as well, and stood up from their seats. Although he had about expected this, Orba, too, was inwardly surprised.

Crossing her hands before her waist, walking gracefully, but showing a firm pace, was Princess Vileena of the Kingdom of Garbera. Behind her, her chief attendant Theresia followed suit. Although both their expressions were stiff, the colour of readiness and determination shone through.

"Ahh, even though she's supposed to never enter the other's chambers before marriage. Although I do understand this is a disgraceful act for a Garberan lady, this

has somehow turned into an unforeseen situation. Please forgive us for our rudeness, Prince Gil."

It seemed that the first to show her determination was Theresia.

In any case, because the ceremony had been interrupted halfway, Gil and Vileena still weren't officially a married couple. Orba again took on the mask of a prince and offered them a seat, but Vileena remained standing stock-still.

"Please, have a listen, and pay no heed to my impoliteness."

The first thing she said, Vileena said with the look of a soldier challenged with war. It was due to her errand, the subject, and, most of all, due to her expectations. Vileena charged that this matter was never an incident directed by her country, and that Garbera didn't feel inclined to stir up trouble with Mephius once more.

"But," Orba interrupted his adversary. "Is this Ryucown not someone from Garbera?"

When his name was spoken, she cast down her eyes for a moment. She tightly chewed on her lip, and immediately regained her composure. The scowling look that she gave seemed to consider Orba as an enemy.

"Yes. Now that this has happened – it's too late. When my country is informed of this incident, Ryucown will be stripped of his knighthood, and lose his Garberan nationality."

"So this was a scheme by Ryucown alone?"

"It only seems most likely. Those soldiers who tried to take me away also used Ryucown's name. And right now, there's only one person in Garbera who has the strength to attack Mephius like this."

"Ryucown?"

"Indeed."

"What kind of person is he?"

The black pupils in her bright and beautiful eyes opened wide. Orba's tone of voice was mild, and she hadn't been prepared for him asking her such an unexpected thing.

"Of course, he is famous enough that his name is known even in our Mephius, but we know nothing of his true nature. Have you happened to meet him, your highness?"

"Yes… I have."

Ryucown's lineage came from a powerful clan of an area that had recently become Garberan territory and, in the generation after his grandfather, had officially become a retainer to the House of Garbera. However, Ryucown's father lost part of his territory due to a skirmish with an equally strong clan, and his family was forced to practically live the life of commoners. Most of the nobles who had become central figures in Garbera had supported the country that was built around the Garberan royal family as dukes[10] for generations and stood firm against any influence from the 'outside lords'.

When Ryucown was ten, he served as a knight commanding a single unit. After getting his first military feat at the age of thirteen, and having many more successes up to the age of twenty, they said he was simply not able to get out from his rank as a knight apprentice.

The status of 'knight' was not a familiar term in Mephius, so she made it easier to understand by explaining it as a noble among warriors. In Garbera, all the people that led the army beneath the king were knights. Although not all nobles were knights, a commoner couldn't ever be one. Ryucown too, because the earlier mentioned dukes considered him an outside connection, didn't seem able to become a knight so easily.

And then, the story traced to five years ago.

At that time, a rebellion took place in Garbera against the royal family.

Having expected to be the leader among the dukes, a man named Bateaux, in cooperation with a number of local clans that had been assimilated by Garbera several years ago, had played a central role in staging the revolts. Although it was considered to have probably been a plot by Mephius, Vileena refrained from speaking about that for the better.

Nine years old at the time, Vileena had been out to play at her grandfather Jeorg Owell's estate, but Bateaux wanted nothing more than to have that palace. At midnight, they were struck by a sudden attack.

[10] The actual term used here is 譜代 'fudai'. They were trusted lords of the Tokugawa family in Japan, similar to dukes in being the most powerful lords beneath the monarchy. The Garberan noble hierarchy described here, is about the same as that of the Tokugawa family in the Edo Period. Outside lords, given positions when the territory expanded, held a lower status.

Although Jeorg, who was at the time retired, fought a commendable battle with a small company of men, the reinforcements he was waiting for didn't seem to come. As he judged it pointless to just increase the number of deaths like this, he decided to submit. With the palace surrendered to Bateaux, Jeorg himself, Vileena, and the others were held hostage.

Jeorg had been injured during that battle. Even without taking his illness into account, the wound was a severe one, and he'd been bedridden ever since. There was a short supply of doctors and medicine, and naturally they couldn't get any supplies from the outside. And the soldiers, who had barely survived the battle, were also in a condition that if one didn't lose his life yesterday, he would do so today.

At that time, Princess Vileena was the one who took over Jeorg's place representing the monarchy in the negotiations with Bateaux. While she had the body of a child, she argued with him on a grand scale. She insisted on keeping herself as a hostage and demanded of him that, first, her wounded grandfather and the dozens of injured soldiers, as well as the women, be released. Bateaux, impressed by the young girl's courage, complied by releasing half of his prisoners, but Jeorg would remain among the remaining half's hostages.

However, although the rebellion had been very effective in its initial stages, it also contributed to internal discord among the families during their struggle for power, and one month passed in which they were being suppressed one after another. In the end, only Bateaux remained with his hostages at the estate, while he continued holding the fort. There was only a little water and food left, but Bateaux didn't intend to lay down his sword. It looked like he was prepared to die in battle.

Be that as it may, his resolution made his troop's morale drop. The people of the palace, who'd become hostages, found collaborators among several of the soldiers. Although several of them were tasked with keeping a tight watch in the castle's underground waterways, one day, they succeeded in making an opening between the watch for but a short amount of time. They tried to take it to their advantage by setting at least Jeorg and Vileena free.

However, Vileena refused. She wasn't sure whether only her wounded grandfather and her young self would be able to escape. And even if they did, Bateaux was bound to find out that they disappeared, completely ruining their secret route in and out of the castle. And the people left behind would stand no chance. They would either starve to death with Bateaux, or might die, swallowed up in the fight when the Garberan army started their relentless assault, as they would no longer have to worry about rescuing the royals.

Although Jeorg was lying on the floor, he agreed with his granddaughter, and they worked out a plan. Vileena had secretly made a rough sketch of the palace layout including the soldiers' positions. She handed it over to a young lad among the hostages and told him to 'join the Garberan troops outside, waiting for this.'

After getting this information, the Garberan army gathered a number of capable hands and sent them into the palace. They used the same route through the underground waterways. Vileena guided them to the hostages, who were imprisoned separately, and they rescued them right away.

Among this small number of elite troops was, of course, the 23-year-old Ryucown. As soon as he gave the sign that the hostages were freed, the Garberan army commenced its attack. And, when the defending forces were too busy with the assault, Ryucown singlehandedly rushed into their midst and personally brought back Bateaux's severed head.

Wow, impressive…

Orba honestly admired the tale deep inside. Not Ryucown's part. But Vileena's – arguing with a rebel at the young age of nine, and still not giving up hope when she'd used her wits together with her grandfather.

Afterwards, when Ryucown's meritorious act of subduing Bateaux was recognized, the previous king Jeorg wrote a personal letter of recommendation to be sent directly to the current king, and he was finally officially appointed as a knight. And, after that, Ryucown quickly rose to fame. His achievements up to then immediately gave him the authorization to command a single air carrier. In Mephian terms, it was like getting the status of a winged dragon officer.

Ryucown further made a name of himself in his battles against Mephius, and soon after, it was decided that he would be engaged with Vileena. It was an attempt to further solidify the sense of unity in the country.

"If I would have to describe General Ryucown's character in a single word, it would be, yes, 'honest'. He's a person who isn't able to cheat. Not even for others, and probably not for himself."

"Himself?"

"Yes," Vileena nodded. He noticed her lips slightly forming into a faint smile.

"Therefore, if it's so that my marriage into Mephius will bring peace, he'll be all the more against it. It's not because his own chances of marrying into the royal family were made void. I don't like it that others might suspect this is the case – I refuse to even consider such criticism. He would never even think of something like that. His feelings are much more straightforward, for he would simply hate to end the fight with Mephius halfway. He carries the pride and courage of a knight more than anyone else. I'm afraid that he's always been a knight, ever since the day he was born."

"Isn't that the idea all Garberan citizens apparently support?"

"No," looking as if she suddenly woke up from a dream, Vileena raised her guard again. "Of course, a lot of people yearn to become someone like General Ryucown. When they decided on having this marriage, there were also a lot of generals who were opposed to the idea. But, that's just an opinion based on the stubborn side of man. Among the royal court, no, within most of the country, everyone wants an end to the war."

"Is that also Lady Vileena's opinion?"

"Me? I… of course."

The girl, whose eyes started to grow dark with a sadness unbecoming of her age, placed a hand on her chest.

"The soldiers are tired, and my people have been forced through hard times for too long. At the very least, to save them from their troubled times, no one could wish it more than me to form an alliance between Mephius and Garbera with this wedding."

Vileena looked straight at Orba, speaking without hesitation. It was within a glance, but for the first time since meeting her, she gracefully showed the true person inside. It was the kind of look that gave off the impression that there wasn't even room for anyone to doubt her words.

And that was exactly what got on Orba's nerves.

"Your people, huh?"

This princess spoke as if she knew her people – with an unquestioning attitude, as if she personally knew them all on sight – but he was certain she wouldn't think twice of someone like him, who stood at the bottom of society. Compared to some of the Mephian nobles, who treated their people as if they weren't even human, it felt as if she looked down on them even more.

"If the royal family caused this war out of their own accord, without considering their people's feelings, how can they now claim to take them into consideration by ending that very same war? Only being born into a different rank completely changes the way you're treated. It was better not to start a war in the first place! If that had happened, we wouldn't have ended up with a situation where a princess has to cast herself into a marriage she doesn't want."

"So, that means… Are you trying to tell me that you, the prince, don't want this marriage either?"

"Aren't we the same? Yesterday, those 'ringleaders' were the ones who caused this blood-stained fight. Today we hold hands, have a marriage, and make peace. But the people who didn't want to fight, or even those who found at least *some* meaning to it, have all ended up under a stack of corpses. What kind of peace is that?"

"That's—"

It looked like, the moment Vileena made a sound, she suddenly sucked in all of her words. Although he may have been right for putting the blame on the royal family, eventually her fair cheeks reached the highest shade of red, and she raised her voice.

"You can simply direct your words at other people's business, but it was *your* imperial family that drove its people and its soldiers into war against us! As for your feigned ignorance, isn't that nothing more than betraying those who have died in your name? We were both born into either the royal or imperial family. It is our duty to devote ourselves to the country's affairs. We cannot help it if it's our duty to quell personal joy or personal will. It's only to be expected that people praise our superior blood and kneel before our superior selves. Without such awareness, not only usurpers, but the populace too, would rise against the royal family."

"Superior blood? Superior selves!?" Orba shouted.

When he was leading a life full of hardships, the thought of royalty hadn't even so much as come up in Orba's mind. So when the word 'superior' came out of Vileena's mouth, it was as if he received the mixed nuance of conceit and mockery full in the face.

"I see. So, as one who was born 'superior', you can hold all the lives of your subjects in your grip. You're completely in control of how they live, and how they die. Your kingdom's 'pride' is nothing more than a figure of speech when you win as long as you can change the rules that'll make you win. Quell personal joy, you say? Just what's the fun in having hundreds, thousands, ten thousands of people, each with their own feelings, kill each other!?"

"You…"

Flying into a rage, Vileena took a step closer to Orba, but Theresia, calling out "Princess!", pinned her arms behind her back when she was halfway there and stopped her.

"What!? You're only fourteen years old – how can you act like you know anything and everything. Go on, tell me!"

Orba, as well, took a step into her direction. When Dinn called out "Prince", hoping to stop him, Gowen and Shique quickly helped him out.

"Let go, dammit! You…"

"Cut it out, Orba," Shique whispered into his ear. "Others are coming. If it's revealed you're a double at a time like this, the peace with Garbera will be entirely gone."

"Don't you think I know?" Orba yelled back, and Gowen continued.

"If it gets out the marriage ceremony was done by a boy double, it won't just be Garbera, but the Mephian imperial family will hang you to protect their own hides. Then what's the meaning of having survived those two years as a sword-slave? Is this the kind of future you had in mind?"

"Let me go Theresia! Unhand me!"

On the other side, too, Theresia was having trouble with the fuming Vileena.

"Please stop this, princess. Just what were you trying to do? You can't deceive my eyes. Though this may be something you didn't like, that was the attitude of a princess about to wallop her company."

"That prince! He's trampling his dirty feet on the Garberan royalty's pride, with the face of a child that knows nothing! What's wrong with hitting him? I'm just teaching him a lesson!"

"Princess, you're revealing your true colours. Control yourself."

They were raising quite a commotion, screaming and brawling like children being brought along to see a dragoneer at the pens for the first time.

At that point, someone else appeared in the room. Of course, the guards had tried to tell them so up front, but it had fallen on deaf ears for Orba and Vileena. That person stared at the strange commotion with boggling eyes.

"Prince! Princess of Garbera!" he shouted out in an angry voice, drawing the attention to himself.

It was Fedom Aulin.

"What's all this about, at a time like this? Lady Vileena, as well. A situation is a situation. Please refrain from any rash behaviour." The two said nothing in return. They were glaring at each other with detest. Fedom cleared his throat.

"Very well, it's actually convenient now that His Highness and Lady Vileena are together. Just now, airships from our country have arrived. They were carrying a notice."

Fedom pulled out the report with a look on his face that suggested he had been quite shocked and surprised by the contents himself.

"Yesterday near dawn, Zaim Fortress, near the border of Ende and Garbera, was occupied by an army calling itself the 'Ryucown Force'. They claim to be the true representatives of the Garberan nation, and that the Garberan royal family fully supports them."

"No way!"

Vileena turned pale and stood stock still as if she'd been hit by a lightning strike. When Orba saw that, although he felt inclined to say it served her right, he immediately blocked that thought.

"Emperor Guhl Mephius has concluded that the sudden attack during the wedding ceremony at hand was also done by Ryucown. Regarding this vicious inhuman act of crushing the country's dignity and its people's hope, our Imperial Dynasty demands retribution. Troops will be sent over and, under the command of the crown prince, Gil Mephius, subjugate Ryucown—"

"What?"

"In a hasty conference with the country of Garbera, we have obtained permission to cross its borders. Without passing through the imperial capital, the crown prince must immediately head for the Fortress City of Idoro along the eastern border. That's what it says." When he finished speaking, Fedom heaved a deep sigh.

When silence swooped down over them, Orba naturally assumed it wasn't related to him at first. But Fedom's eyes told him that this would be his 'first campaign'.

Chapter 5 – Princess Vileena

Part 1

Zaim was known for being an impregnable fortress. To the north, steep cliffs touched the border of Ende, and to the south an unobstructed view of plains was spread out. If Mephius actually wanted to cross the border and invade, Zaim Fortress was considered to be its biggest hurdle.

Ryucown had made it surrender in the blink of an eye and turned it into his own stronghold. It could be he had the help of traitors, but it could also be that the people at Zaim Fortress never intended to turn their blades toward Ryucown, because he was a Garberan to begin with.

And besides…

Maybe he secretly got assistance from the Principality of Ende.

This assumption was shared by both Mephius and Garbera. If not, he wouldn't last with supplies like food, water, and ammunition. And for Ende, right now, they'd conveniently split the Garberan territory in two. In that way, it was good that Ryucown's tactics hadn't forcibly placed neighbouring villages under his control, or he would've received the enmity of its people.

"Our current Garbera has lost sight of adhering to pride above all!" Ryucown shouted with a loud voice. "Even if we bear the shame of a traitor for the moment, we inherit Garbera's true pride. Disloyalty shames a knight, but we cannot stay devoted to obeying any senseless ruler. We must consider once again for what cause we should spill our blue blood. Do not mind bearing shame. We will open this fort's gates and welcome all true knights that dedicate their bodies only for true loyalty."

Ryucown cut off the heads of all the messengers, disregarding even the counsel from his own home country Garbera. And not only that. He also conducted a surprise attack with his airship on an advance party marching to recapture the fort, before taking flight again.

Within the Garberan royal court, it was the firm opinion that they should quickly send in a whole army to make Zaim surrender in order to protect the royal family's dignity. But what they feared most of all was that Ende would participate in the war.

At the moment they were still keeping quiet, but if the Principality of Ende publicly admitted to having a collaborative relationship with Ryucown, it was feared Zaim Fortress would become a stronghold for Ende when they challenged Garbera. And

with Garbera throwing aside an alliance with them, Ende also had a just cause to do so.

Hence, Garbera had no qualms against Mephius's request.

Namely, they allowed the Mephian army to cross the Garbera's national border, making it possible for them to line up formations and attack Zaim Fortress from the west .

It was about a week after the surprise attack at Seirin Valley.

As time went flying by, the situation was also littered with various apprehensions. The Mephian group led by Prince Gil immediately started heading for Idoro. It lay closest to the borders of Ende and Garbera, and was a fortress city that had often been at the forefront during the war with Garbera.

A group of sword slaves from the Tarkas Group was also forced to travel along the journey. Their weapons and dragons confiscated, and moving at a distance while being surrounded by military guards, they were no doubt suffering from stress regarding the dispiriting anxiety for their future. However, thanks to Gowen's skilfulness, they quietly obeyed for the time being.

Although it might have been the same day-to-day feeling for those living under Tarkas, the situation was more complicated than that because of the Garberan party. In any case, because the ceremony had been interrupted, the marriage between Prince Gil and Princess Vileena had not been concluded. However, wilfully going back home at this point would be a disgrace for the both of them.

"I will go to Idoro as well," Vileena had told her own country's delegation, and had gone travelling along to Idoro with Theresia. For the Mephian side it also gave them the impression they were keeping her as a hostage, but, naturally, Vileena herself had already taken that all into account.

The army moved while the goods were carried by dragon carts. The cavalry and the dragonriders atop the small-sized dragons guarded all directions, while the imperial and royal family members moved in coaches at the centre, surrounded by the soldiers on foot.

"I suppose this will be Prince Gil's first battle," Orba said, with Fedom sitting opposite him inside the coach.

"But am I not the one behind the scenes? Aren't you being much too overprotective, no matter how you look at it?"

"Shut it," Fedom called back, irritated. "There's no need for someone like you to learn the imperial family's methods of raising a good emperor. You should just do as you're told."

"So I'm to command when I'm told, order friends to die when I'm told, and kill the enemy when I'm told?"

"That would be splendid."

Orba, no less irritated, still felt the traces from his quarrel with Vileena.

"Now stop talking. We don't know who could be listening."

And that was the ulterior motive Fedom had. Originally, the written letters had urged him to return to his homeland Birac. Simon alone had been assigned to be the prince's support. However, Simon knew the prince's temperament very well. So, because Fedom was concerned Simon would suspect the prince of being a fake at the current campaign, other 'support' was necessary.

At most…

If the prince did do an outstanding job here, this time nobles would turn up believing the prince held unifying qualities. If Fedom was able to gather up those people and have them back the prince, it might be possible to create a completely new political power in the next era. Besides, the Prince Gil in question was the same as a puppet that did anything Fedom told him to. On behalf of the corrupted imperial family, he himself could advocate supremacy in these current troubles times – just thinking of it, made Fedom's heart pound with boyish excitement as blood rushed to his head.

Meanwhile,

"Prince."

Simon Rodloom, who called from outside of the coach, naturally had his misgivings.

"What is it?" Fedom's face appeared instead.

Simon, who had gone to the battlefield himself in his younger days, was, to be expected, skilful with handling his horse. Matching the coach's speed, he tried to peek inside. The prince was resting his cheek against the window on the opposite side.

"These past few days, we've hardly seen your face. Although I do hope you're not doing that to cope with the shock received from what happened at Seirin Valley. It might also place a gap on the tale of your first battle. So—"

"The prince is in good health," Fedom said smiling. "Even now, we were exchanging several views and opinions concerning the capture of Zaim Fortress. Later on, we'd also like to listen to your views on the matter, Master Simon. Oh… Your Highness, is it a little too bright? Please forgive me."

Fedom acted as if the prince had talked to him and quickly closed the carriage's curtains.

That is strange.

Spurring on his horse, Simon rubbed his chin. Fedom's sudden intimacy and the prince's change of heart in these last few days… It wouldn't be such a miracle if the prince he knew so well, experiencing such an uproar during the ceremony, had lost himself amongst the public. However, from what he'd heard, it seemed the prince had given orders to the knights, and held the enemy at bay before they could kidnap Vileena. Although, as a substitute guardian, he was supposed to be pleased with the prince's growth, this was far from being human, and he couldn't simply accept it.

Be that as it may, I haven't seen the boy for three days.

And, at a distance of fifty metres behind, Vileena and Theresia were rocking about in a similarly heavily escorted coach.

Vileena had been silent the whole time. She was lost in thought as she looked out at the scenery flying by outside the window. Theresia had her eyes fixed on the side of her mistress' face.

She was the image of a beautiful girl who, at first glance seemed to be in her puberty but, if not, wasn't grown up either. But it was apparent to anyone who so much as glanced her way that she was worriedly longing for something precious to her. The eyelashes covering her eyes were dark, and the bridge of her nose was a thin line. Her petal-like lips were slightly wet, and her skin nearly crystalline white.

If an honest boy around the same age saw the girl staring off into the distance from her carriage's window, on his way home from work on the farm, he'd be inexplicably bound with only a single glance. But looking at himself, after having gone through some hundred nights passionately yearning for her despite the issue of social differences, he would eventually marry some village girl and get children. But even if he'd be reading a book by the fireplace surrounded by grandchildren,

undoubtedly, he would never be able to forget that one pubertal afterimage of only a single glance until the day he died…

Theresia, quite touched by her own fabrications, gently wiped away a tear with her hand. This was youth. And, when a voice called out "Theresia", she looked up as if nothing had happened.

"Yes, what is it, your highness?"

"Theresia, how old are you now?"

"Well… when you reach the latter half of your forties, you eventually stop counting. Then it's normal to look forward to continue on at that age forever."

"I see," Vileena said, as she rested her chin in her hand. "That's quite convenient."

"Of course, in the meantime, there were various encounters and farewells. Also many men. Speaking about love, there have also been several marriage proposals."

"I would love to hear about that someday," Vileena said with a little smile.

"Don't say someday, but right now. It's obvious your highness can use this little as a reference."

"I didn't say I wanted to hear such things. Cease your suspicious behaviour."

With an angry frown, Vileena turned away.

Oh my…

Although Theresia thought she was cute, that naturally didn't come out of her mouth. But it was worth teasing her. So, because she would otherwise be bored daydreaming again, her slightly mischievous side came to surface.

"This Prince Gil has one utterly curious side to him, doesn't he?" Theresia said, feigning ignorance. She didn't seem to notice Vileena glaring her way either.

"I really haven't decided what to think of him," she continued. "Strangely enough, he has the attitude of someone who knows the world, but unbecoming of royal family he – how to say this correctly – sometimes still seems to speak like a child. Oddly, it's something I worry about. Whether or not he will become a good husband, I'm certain he's not the type that would fit into the Garberan court, right?"

"I guess he's just a fool. Judging from all the rumours I've heard, it's not such a big surprise," Vileena said curtly. "As an enemy, he's manageable. But it's true I have to

know a lot more details. They say that intelligence is everything in a battle, or so grandfather told me."

"A battle?"

"Yes, a battle so that no more blood will be shed."

In the days after their arrival at Idoro, Orba did not change for the better. There was hardly anything he could do until the reinforcements arrived from the capital. With his own country still negotiating with the Garberan side, not even coming close to concluding matters, there was nothing he could decide here without permission.

The fortress of Idoro was known to be strong, although it was a little less daunting than Zaim. The ramparts surrounding the urban areas around the fort were laid out in several layers, making it look like a maze. Walking around there in a sightseeing mood, Orba currently had to bring a lot of people along with him.

With his head thinking about the campaign, he was reminded of the skirmishes between the groups he experienced during his childhood, and that he had no more than the knowledge gained from things like hero stories. In any case, even though Orba had to continue being a body double, not for Mephius' or the crown prince's sake, but for his own sake, the state of both his head and feet were truly unsteady.

There were also other worries.

One evening when he was walking through the city, he saw that a crowd had formed. On the other side, sword-slaves were being made to walk, hauled off by around ten guardsmen. Their destination was Idoro's detention facilities.

Despite Ryucown's treason having come to the surface, and having cleared away the doubts that they were directly involved in the event, this was no excuse for Tarkas having been used for the prince's assassination, and it seemed to have taken form in having the ownership of his slaves taken away. To make matters worse, the lord of Idoro was known to be the possessor of an extremely cruel disposition toward slaves.

"Lately there's been rumours that, in order to raise the troop's morale, all slaves are going to have their heads cut off in front of the soldiers," Dinn further explained, shuddering.

The gladiators weren't close friends. On the contrary, even though they'd shared their meals, they also had the kind of relationship that there would be no doubt or hesitation if they were instructed to kill each other on the next day.

But foremost, Orba's anger was at the nobles who controlled lives and destinies as they wished. Because of them, they truly were not treated the same as the people around them.

"Personal guards under direct command?"

Orba had heard about it at the morning of their third day stay. Dinn had carelessly slipped his tongue while he was helping out with breakfast.

The imperial family, who were authorized to command the army, were able to directly choose their personal guard. The possibility to be chosen as part of the imperial guard was popular among the sons of nobles, with the exception of the eldest sons who would have to lose their right of inheritance, but it was also possible to choose people not from such a status, and even give them the position of officer. Prince Gil was given that authority at the age of fifteen, but Dinn said he had not specially employed it.

That evening, Orba left for the detention camp, passing many staircases, for the multiplexed structural arrangement of this fortress was made so to keep the whole of public eye at a distance. A hundred gladiators were tucked away in a cramped room. They looked left and right in confusion at the prince's sudden appearance, which he thought wasn't so strange considering Kain was working on an escape plan for the night, and he laughed inwardly. Even now, he was cunningly working with dexterous fingers, attempting to escape.

"What!? Are you serious, Orba!?"

Gowen unintentionally raised his voice, before Shique blocked his mouth.

"Yeah, I'm serious."

"What made you think of something so brash?" Shique, as expected of him, spoke in a hushed voice, but his face looked shocked. "If this is true, don't you think the people around you will be more suspicious of your true identity."

"Don't worry. I've been collecting information about the prince. He's just a huge idiot, and doesn't even listen to other people's advice. Actually, this is just the kind of thing such a dim-witted prince would do. I'm thrilled you want to save yourselves, but I'd like to make the gladiators my own personal guards."

Because the investigation was still going on, Tarkas himself was left in the building, but all of the remaining gladiators were made into Gil Mephius' personal guards. The company-employed blacksmith who carried out the armour's repairs, and the

girl entrusted in taking care of the dragons, Hou Ran, were also granted the status of Imperial Guard.

One official paper, marked with a sign in the prince's handwriting, as he was taught by Dinn in these past few days, fully sufficed. When Fedom found out afterwards, he was obviously in a fit of anger. However, Orba made a face as if to say 'is something the matter?'.

"Well, now I've already done it. When the real prince replaces me in the future, he can undo it or expel them if he wants to. Until then – let's see – we're okay on horses and dragons, but could you prepare weapons and armour for them? The ones from the company are all just second-hands. I also want several guns exclusive to the Imperial Guard."

"Bastard! Mind you – I will remember all of this! Don't do any more unnecessary things. You can't even breathe freely without having my direct permission. Don't forget that your life fully rests on how I feel about you."

"That feeling's mutual."

"What did you say!?"

Despite Dinn anxiously fidgeting around between the two of them, Orba gave Fedom a sharp look.

"You should've understood that, right? But fine… I also don't want to drive myself into a corner any more than necessary. I'll leave my selfishness up to this extent. Instead, I'll ask you for the equipment."

"You mongrel…"

Fedom, who seemed about to faint from anger anytime soon, also directed his glare at Dinn, and Orba was about to dismiss the grand noble from his room.

"Tomorrow, I'll do anything you say even if it's a depressing play. If I truly get carried away and do whatever I want before the first battle, you can give me any scolding you want. So, scoot, scoot! You're a busy man, aren't you?"

Interesting…

After driving Fedom out, with Dinn's scolding going in one ear and out the other, Orba had this thought for the first time since coming into this situation.

In any case, he was the crown prince. While there were many inconveniences, as a commoner he could act as he pleased and do what he liked. Placing gladiators directly under his control as soldiers for instance, although looking back, he couldn't honestly say that he'd saved them from the nobles. But there was also his intention in wanting to know how much was he able to do, and for how long his self-proclaimed owner, Fedom, would permit this pet dog's 'biting habits'.

Even if I find out, I suppose I should be a little bit more careful.

If Fedom directly saw Orba as a dangerous person, he would probably lose all of this small freedom he currently had. Perhaps even his life. And if that was over, there would've been no use to playing those antics.

Two days later, the expeditionary forces arrived from the capital. It had been decided Prince Gil would lead the troops.

Two dragonstone air carriers, 50 dragoons, 150 horsemen, and 500 foot soldiers – a considerable amount to be entrusted to a supreme commander on his first campaign.

The populace packed together at the main street as the troops came striding in, and Orba was looking down at them from the castle balcony. As the airships flew in the sky, the clattering of armour sounded, and a forest of spears and rifles formed in a line, it felt exactly like a scene from the historical novels or heroic tales he'd feasted on during his childhood.

Entranced by that gallant display, Orba's eyes were gleaming like that of a boy. If seen by his companions from his time as a gladiator, he was certain that they wouldn't be able to believe he was the same person, and not just because he no longer had a mask.

After that, doing as Fedom told him to, Orba went out to meet them at the castle square. But when his eyes made contact with the flagship's captain, who had become a great general of long service, at the centre of his troops, the joy and excitement from his childhood vanished at once.

Part 2

This was all too unexpected.

Beyond unexpected, he was late in noticing this was the scene that he'd been waiting for all this time.

Clad in simple black armour, standing with his heels together in front of the 'prince', the man bowing before him had a characteristic kind of smile that could be taken as arrogance.

That majestic air he had still remained the same as before. Back then, he'd ordered to 'set fire to the lot' from horseback.

Oubary…

With all his nerves on edge, a wave of heat ran through his body. His throat was dry, and he felt dizzy.

At the same time, all kinds of future possibilities came to mind. Immediately leap at this man and strangle his neck with his bare hands, stab him with his sword, shoot a bullet through his head, or interrogate him about Alice's, his mother's, or his brother's whereabouts – every temptation was twirling through his mind with the same intensity, stirring up, and Orba was thrown away by all of its strength.

But now… as Prince Gil Mephius, instead of choosing such a direct approach without regard to his future, it should be possible to create other options. A crueller, more striking, and more tragic way of chasing down this man.

Orba, standing upright, hardly heard the other person's greetings. Fedom accepted the greetings on his behalf. When he was informed that there was a party being arranged to feed their courage in the castle hall, Oubary adjutant replied.

"Well, wouldn't it be as easy to stretch the soldiers' feathers even when we're not there? I would like you to immediately hear us out in a war council. There is also a message from His Majesty, Emperor Guhl."

"Ahh yes, I understand."

Next to him, cheerfully smiling, Oubary gave the 'prince' his greetings.

"It has been a long time, Your Highness. And it is finally the prince's first campaign. The unworthy me, Oubary, has the privilege to be of your assistance. If nothing more, I will make sure to decorate your first battle with victory."

For a short while, Orba didn't say a thing and stared at Oubary's spread purple lips.

"Yeah…" he said, nodding. "I'll leave it to you."

Oubary Bilan, aged 44, was a strong general who had rushed out into the battlefield

against Garbera many times over. He had once assumed responsibility of guarding Apta Fortress, but when the Garberan army cut through his forces and started besieging the fortress, he'd immediately pulled back his troops by his own country's demands. They wanted to cut the Garberan armies in two – namely, get rid of Apta in the early stages, and cross over the border in one sweep where they raided a Garberan strike force prepared to attack Idoro.

This decoy strategy became a similar retaliation strike for Garbera, and Mephius lost part of its southern territory, but it had brought a lot of damage on Garbera in return.

After that, he'd continued at the frontlines, and this time he'd been ordered to accompany the prince on his first campaign.

"So now I have to become this kid's babysitter?"

Oubary had sullenly spoken those words over his shoulder when he'd received his orders. Although he bragged about being better in fights than anyone else in Mephius, in reality he'd mostly survived by taking the leftover fights.[11]

Above that, he was also heavily opposed to the peace with Garbera. He was not the kind of man with the guts to openly speak against the emperor, but, for someone who'd been standing on the battlefield since the beginning of this ten-year-war, his irritation for putting an end to it with such halfway measures was all the worse.

He was as much as a reverse rebel.

"It should've been left as it was. No, cooperating with these rebels instead and plunging Garbera into a long period of mayhem would've been even better. If that was the case, we could've increased our military strength and taken over the Garberan capital."

Although he spoke about such fabrications with resourceful families, as he soon learned of the incident at Seirin Valley, it had gradually changed Oubary's way of thinking. The scale of the fight was never all that big, but this would no doubt define the positions between the three countries for future relationships.

Even I'm not a man who can choose his future by himself.

He had his own ambitions. After the peace talks, a letter directed to him personally had arrived from none other than of the biggest peace opposition in Garbera. Could it have been proof that they were afraid of his name and strength? He could make even more a name of himself, if he would broaden his future course.

[11] Actually: 勝ち残り - it's a term for someone who wins by laying low and then take the finishing blow when necessary, like a kill-stealer.

On top of that, Oubary also knew the crown prince Gil Mephius' personality well. He would be headed for a glorious first campaign – after all, that prince wouldn't be able to accomplish anything by himself. He planned to take away his full authority.

"Ahh, but…" he joked, drinking wine together with his subordinates before leaving the capital. "I will have to make it look like it's all the prince's doing. It'll be troublesome in the future, if I get under his skin."

That night, a war council was held, and it was proceeding at Oubary's pace, just as he had intended.

At first, his adjutant announced the results of the conference with Garbera, which he'd brought from the capital. It was decided that they attack the fortress on both sides, where Mephius would advance from the west, and Garbera from the south.

"Does it say anything about sending scouts to Ende?" Simon remarked on Mephius' marching route along the border of Ende.

If it turned out that Ryucown and Ende were having a cooperative relationship, there was the danger that the Mephian army would be the first to receive a surprise attack.

"Although we more than stand out, Ende will not likely rally that easily. But even if that happens they can be expecting a pincer attack in turn."

"In this case, we can't expect to rely on even the diplomatic skills of our country," Fedom said, looking out over a map of the surrounding area spread on the desk. "One option might be to send an envoy during the march, in the crown prince's name."

"Yes, just to be sure. We can also help by pulling out Idoro's defence force and have them ensure the line of supplies," the Lord of Idoro, Julius, agreed to Simon's appeal.

While the unit's organization and the talks of deployment started, Oubary fleetingly looked over at the prince. Ever since the war council commenced, he hadn't spoken a word, but simply had his arms folded, staring ahead of him.

It was obvious from that start that there wasn't anything he could do, and Oubary secretly smiled inside.

"Do you agree with this, your highness?"

He tried to force him to join the talk. The prince instantly looked his way, but immediately averted his gaze and replied,

"Yeah."

After that, he continued to say nothing more. All of the commanding officers present at the war council exchanged glances.

Keep up that attitude, your imperial highness…

Crossing both arms, which were not covered by his leather undershirt, Oubary was barely able to suppress the smile that almost came to the surface.

You should just leave everything to Oubary after this. Well I will probably have to rack my brains a little on how to get a 'fair achievement for the prince'. I guess it'll be a difficult battle if I have to win without losing a single soldier.

While Prince Gil was being exposed to the older man's gaze, he – Orba – was digging his nails into his arms.

A little while ago, it had taken him full concentration, and great effort not to look at Oubary. He had a feeling he wouldn't be able to stay calm if he looked at his face right now. He had almost lost his self-control just by hearing his voice. Above all, this small room was the worst. Even if he averted his eyes, the murmurs and every breath Oubary took reached Orba's ears.

His heart had been jumping around so much that it hurt, and his blood seemed to be rushing to every corner of his body, more than it should be able to. They were preparing for a confrontation. His entire body was giving him the sign to go. His arms, legs, and every fibre of his muscles that he'd been training for a period of two years were telling him to kill this bastard right now.

The colour of flames, the acrid smoke, Alice being taken away, and the charred bodies of the villagers were recurring in his head. And his brother Roan, who smiled whenever he called out his name.

Oubary had ditched his brother, who shouldn't have had to pick up a sword and go into battle for his family's sake in the first place. And the careless survivor, Orba, was now near him. The survivor of that smoking village back then, who hadn't for one in a thousand thoughts imagined to have him this close within reach!

Was there really a reason to show this guy any sympathy?

Was there any reason for showing him mercy and having him live longer for even one second?

Kill him.

There was a whispering voice in the back of his mind. It quickly turned into a shout, and before long it became a chorus of voices with a thunderous tempo and rhythm.

Kill him.

You can kill him now – you can kill him!

Now! Kill him!!

That instant, Orba stood up from his seat.

The discussion stopped, and everyone fixed their eyes on him.

Then, there was a knock on the door.

"…What?" Orba asked in response.

He had just been about to leave the room. If he stayed there any longer, he feared he would no longer be able to restrain himself. However, when he heard a voice telling him Princess Vileena was in the next room, again in response, he was forced to stand his ground.

"Oh, what business does a Garberan princess have in a war council?" Oubary said, deliberately sounding denigrating. Then he jokingly added, "Could it be she's gotten worried that we might be bullying her husband? Well, my image isn't very good. I haven't even once left a good first impression on any woman I've met."

A few people laughed in response.

"Let her go back," Fedom said.

"No," Simon pitched in. "She's a key ally. We can't ignore her. Let her in. Do you mind, prince?"

Orba didn't have a reason or the willpower to refuse. So, he nodded and sat back down.

Before long, Vileena came in by herself. At a place for men, and a place to speak of war, there was a strange feeling of discomfort about a princess's interference.

Whether or not she was aware of it, Vileena's innocent, beautiful features were radiating the colour of determination, like that one day.

"People of Mephius. First of all, please forgive a woman's impertinent words at the place of a war council. Such a thing is exceptional in Garbera as well. With this, I – Vileena Owell – bare shame upon myself."

Several minutes after, despite their glaring eyes, the military officers were all insincerely putting her at ease and commenting about how her enthusiastic attitude received praise.

The Princess of Garbera, wanting to avoid a solution by military means, insisted on letting her persuade Ryucown by herself. If it came to a head-on collision, no matter which camp had the advantage, Garberan lands would burn and its people would die. However, Ryucown was a patriotic knight who was concerned about Garbera's future. That belief had gone too far this time and had caused such an act of folly. Thus, the young princess fervently advocated in her speech that they should turn him back to his righteous self.

"Of course, the crime of aiming for the life of the Gracious Heir to the Mephius Empire's throne is severe. I am willing to seek the Mephius' support on how to deal with the ringleaders, starting with Ryucown. I am definitely aware this is not matter for Garbera alone. Therefore…"

"Right now, that is for talks after the war," the winged dragon officer, Rogue Saian, cut in.

Although the others sent reproachful looks his way as he stood up, it was obvious they were all cheering him on in their hearts.

"This is our retaliation for the attack on our imperial family. It's been clear from the beginning that this was never a matter for Garbera alone!"

As the most established among Mephius' twelve generals, even Oubary sometimes came to him for instructions or to ask for advice. It wasn't clear if he was older or younger than Gowen – even at a war council, he was fully clad in the heavyset armour of his ancestors. It looked like he had the spirit of a true warrior at heart.

Facing him, Vileena hardly knew a thing about war, and no matter how much her young zeal burned, she would be highly judged for being a princess of her age. Her mouth was already filled with words to bring forth an immediate rebuttal.

But the other generals, stirred up by the veteran's spirit, spoke up instead.

"Garbera may see the Mephian army marching into their lands to quell Ryucown's rebellion as quite worrying, but we're not brigands. We're not like thieves that take advantage of a fire and lay waste to Garberan lands."

"Apart from that, Garbera itself has given our advance their consent. It's best if we don't hinder the organisation between countries just from a single princess' ideas."

"T-That's," Vileena said, bending forward. "At least let me have the privilege of accompanying this campaign. I also don't think I can do this alone. However, it's impossible for me to stand by and keep quiet in a quarrel between my own kinsmen."

The soldiers and senior statesmen again exchanged glances.

Oh dear – this princess was proving to be most troublesome.

"There's no reason to stand by and keep quiet, Princess Vileena, as your father has requested our cooperation."

"Besides," Oubary said, smoothing things over. "For our country, the princess still holds the importance of being in preparation for marrying the prince. We can't very well do something like taking you along to the battlefield."

Vileena lowered her head. Orba remembered that expression where she tightly bit her lip. For a woman as smart as her, she ought to be heavily aware of how her appearance and intervention at a war council was considered a nuisance. And yet, she couldn't keep quiet. She still wasn't held back.

Her royal duties…

The words Vileena had spoken were brought back in his mind. Something unwavering and unshakable – not for him, but rather for Vileena – seemed to be hidden in those words. And at the same time, for each and every human, to know what kind of person you really are was too difficult a question for only one person to hold. Not knowing what to do with those feelings in his heart, he thought back on that time when he looked up at the night sky with his brother Roan.

Very well, then. Your beliefs – let me test them out.

"So, you can leave."

"Please wait and have trust in your father, and your future husband."

"Wait. Everyone, please—" Vileena brought herself forward even more.

It was as if she still hadn't realised the indifferent, fed-up mood that hung in the air, when,

"Let's have the princess accompany us," he said.

Everyone turned to stare at the prince looking as if they'd just suddenly been struck by an arrow. Some of them looked amazed, wondering whether they should be the ones to first open their mouths.

"Your Highness," Oubary said after some time, showing quite a controlling presence, and a slightly chiding smile. "I'm sure that, if she's at your side, you will have the ferocity of a lion on the battlefield. But, although you may win the princess's heart, the battlefield has its ironbound rules. I beg of you, do not act rashly. How about choosing a more suitable place for your honeymoon later?"

His words invited some unintentional smiles from the senior statesmen.

"Let's have Princess Vileena as our standard-bearer."

They once again looked the prince's way. He had his arms crossed and was staring ahead, just like before.

"Many Garberan soldiers are probably as anxious as the princess about the coming battle. I don't believe it's good if they're having doubts. There are also uncertainties on our side on whether or not this cooperation will work out."

"……"

"If we have Princess Vileena as our standard-bearer among them, it will carry the same meaning for both the armies of Mephius and Garbera. Ryucown himself might agree on an assembly with Princess Vileena, but if he doesn't comply it means he's nothing more than a mere rebel. Thus, it will also clear away all doubts the Garberan army may have about this battle if we eventually force Ryucown to surrender his forces in a righteous way."

Including Vileena, nobody was able to utter a sound.

Oubary stared fixedly at the prince's face from the side, and the prince fleetingly glanced his way. Instantly, the prince looked away again, but Oubary was startled to see the hostility in his eyes. He could've been mistaken. However, Oubary secretly broke out in a cold sweat.

As the silence continued, the far away noise of the party and sound of flutes at the castle's reception hall rode in with the evening breeze.

Part 3

Five days later, the campaign force finished its preparations and started out from the fortress. A line of defence stretched out from Idoro fortress, standing ready for any surprise attacks from Ende while they crossed the Garberan border.

Prince Gil was on the bridge of the flagship Dhum. Although Orba had watched ships go up into the sky several times, this was, of course, the first time he had ever boarded one.

Dhum was a large dragonstone ship that could house up to two hundred soldiers. The ship was currently gliding close over the ground, but its top speed was 90 kilometres an hour[12], and it could rise two kilometres above ground. Considering it was a ship this large, it was most likely a top performer amongst its class.

Dhum and the single-seated airships, which were all called dragonstone ships, were the result of 'magic'. The science that mankind had back when it crossed the ocean of space had already declined.

This is the history of more than hundreds, thousands of years ago, that was passed on…

Seeking an environment to emigrate to, mankind had started on a journey from Earth into space, and in the end, they finally arrived at this planet.

It would've been only natural for everyone to try and re-establish the same scientific culture here, but the frequent raids of a subhuman race – the Ryuujin tribe – claiming to be descendants of the dragon gods, soon depleted the weapons and energy that were piled up in their spaceship. Also, because the properties of the resources they mined on this planet greatly differed from those on Earth, it was getting close to impossible to restore the civilization from the Earth Era.

At that time, while they held back a fifth consecutive invasion from the Ryuujin tribe, there was a sage named Zodias, later to be known as the King of Magic.

Zodias had originally been a researcher on the historic ruins scattered across the planet. He was trying to unravel the secrets of the civilization in which the dragon gods had once prospered. The uncovered artefacts, of uncertain usage, greatly differed from Earth's science and he was convinced they held some sort of power.

[12] 56 mph

He discovered that the mechanism, a substance poured down with the sun and vaporizing in the sea, had an entirely different nature. It couldn't be detected even with the science and technology of Earth, but Zodias, furthering his investigation on the artefacts, named that substance 'ether'.

In response to the artefacts, ether caused various physical reactions. Fire, explosions, water purification, repulsion to geomagnetism, and a rise or fall in temperature… Based on various experimental results, Zodias successfully created new objects that were similar in nature to the artefacts, and was able to wield 'magic' in causing the phenomena he wanted.

With the use of this magic, Zodias managed to send the Ryuujin Tribe back to the ends of the earth and reigned as a new king that unified almost all of the lands on the planet. That prosperity and what would ultimately cause the downfall of the Zodias era, however, is yet another story.

Anyhow, the vehicles that had the ability to suspend above ground and go through the sky on this planet, like the airships and air frigates, weren't science, but an inheritance from the magic that Zodias gave birth to.

In order to acquire floating ability, a power to repel the gravitational force was created with the use of ether, and when it flew, ether was radiated and scattered about. Of course, when the ether runs dry it would lose its ability to float, and the more it rose in altitude, the more the power to repel gravity lost its strength.

These ships were generally called 'dragonstone ships' because the skeletal frame of these ships was made of the so-called weightless metal that was refined from the dragonbone fossils excavated from the ancient layers of the earth.

These days, good dragonstone was a valuable resource, all the more because of the occurrence of ether depleting worldwide, which also caused the magic civilization to decline. And, even though it couldn't be mass produced, it was certainly an indispensable military power to have on hand.

Orba would show up on the bridge, for several hours a day, before heading back to his room to rest. This was also what Fedom had suggested, after all, as he'd put it, 'you can't make mistakes when you don't show your face'.

Orba found it convenient. Having all eyes upon him just for sitting still and staring ahead of him went against his nature and, moreover, he had been deep in thought these last few days.

Mephius, Ende, Garbera, and Ryucown.

He wanted to know their strengths and characteristics. Because he was unsure of his own knowledge of them, he had Dinn, who had received a much higher education than he, and Gowen and Shique, who said they'd lived in other lands before serving under the Tarkas Group, supplement him.

First of all, from Garbera's point of view, they obviously couldn't ignore Ryucown's rebellion. However, as only one country, they would be at an overwhelming disadvantage if Ende participated in the war. In the likely event that Ende *did* have ties with Ryucown, they might also take the opportunity to take the next step and advance on the capital.

But what Garbera feared above all was internal discord. There were many vigorous, energetic youths within the country who had gathered under Ryucown and believed that they ought to attack Mephius. It was even possible that they'd abandon the royal family at the capital and form a new royal family by exploiting Vileena's and Ryucown's marriage.

"Concerning Mephius," Gowen analysed, "They hope to strengthen their alliance when the marriage is concluded as it is after defeating Ryucown here as a team. They will also be prepared to face off against Ende, and they have the opportunity to place Garbera in their debt with the current campaign."

On the other hand, if the wedding didn't hold, the territory of Garbera would be split between the royal family and Ryucown, which wasn't so bad either. If it so happened that the alliance got annulled, Mephius might possibly be approached by Ende instead, setting their sights on collaborating with Mephius instead if it could make a change to their own country's advantage.

But in that case, there was another risk.

"In contrast to what you just said, should Ryucown obtain Princess Vileena, they could unify the whole country with the cooperation of Ende." What they thought and how they moved – many routes were open before them, and they also had to consider the actions among each of these movements.

"Gowen, isn't Iver originally from Garbera?" Orba suddenly said, mentioning a gladiator's name.

"Ahh. He did work as a mercenary, but he said it didn't fill his plate, so he became a bandit."

“Seriously, you're thinking of slipping him over to Ryucown’s side? But they’re a hard-knit bunch of guys, he’ll be noticed right away.”

“Not if it’s in the midst of a chaotic battle, don’t you think?”

Orba immediately summoned Iver, and gave him some instructions. Of course, he did all of this as a ‘prince’. The only sword-slave who knew about his real identity was Shique.

Half a day after they crossed the border, the Mephian army was lined up on a hill that overlooked Zaim Fortress. They had their artillery ready for the siege.

The allied forces of Garbera were south of the fortress, and it took them about three hours to set up their battle formations on the plains next to it. Mephius had sent an envoy to Ryucown. This was to tell them that Princess Vileena was aboard their flagship, and to endorse them to surrender.

The envoy came back in less than an hour. But, although they’d headed off with three people, only one of them had been allowed to return. The face of the man who’d arrived on his knees at the bridge was pale.

“Rescuing Princess Vileena from the dastardly Mephians that hold her hostage is our most pressing concern. Although the princess will receive a hearty welcome if she wishes to take the trouble to come over, we will never allow any Mephian to set foot within this fortress.”

Along with the envoy’s message, Orba was handed a set of binoculars from one of the non-commissioned officers[13]. When he looked through, he saw two spears raised on top of the fort. There were freshly severed heads hoisted at the tips. It was Ryucown’s reply.

“Now this man’s a rebel to his lord – isn’t he, prince?” Oubary said as he peered through a similar pair of binoculars. He hadn’t believed from the beginning that a ‘just cause’ like this would have the Garberan side working together with them on this.

“Our military force is greater,” he continued. “All right. Let’s start attacking them on from both sides immediately. If we waste any more time, Ende could send reinforcements over to Ryucown’s aid.”

Thinking that the prince’s excessive ‘meddling’ had ended with this, Oubary immediately gave the order to advance. With this, the prince’s abundant meddling

[13] JP: 下士官 Lit. 'low officer'. In Edo-Japan this was a term for one who was enlisted as an officer, but not of noble birth.

(speaking voice) came to an end, it looked like he immediately gave Oubary the order to march. However, Orba interrupted him, saying,

"Wait."

Everyone on the bridge, including the generals, looked at him with puzzled looks.

"First, let's make sure that the Garberan side is ready as well."

The opening of the battle commenced just before sunset. The Garberan troops went for the attack from the south, while the Mephian army held back to provide covering fire. But it had little effect anyhow, as the Mephian encampment was further from the fortress.

The dragoons clashed with each other on the middle of the plains. There was a clash of weapons scattering, as spearheads ran through the enemies' heads, making them flutter through the air.

There was an iron solidarity and teamwork among Ryucown's forces. Arrows shot out from the fortress as the Garberan forces tried to advance, and there were bursts of gunfire here and there on the plains – scattering about the flesh of dragons, horses, and humans.

Furthermore, while the aerial forces were mainly on standby up in the air, sometimes they would swoop in to attack at the right time. Additionally, Ryucown's soldiers who had set up small bases around the fort, performed back-up by gunfire. It was an exquisite arrangement. The Garberan troops were at a standstill, and the aerial forces on Garbera's side were also the victim of gunfire. They had fallen to a state where they couldn't receive their ally's support either.

"What the hell's Mephius doing!?"

"Gahh, we're at our limits! Fall back, fall back!!"

"Lift the dragonstone ships – withdraw under the cover of their cannons! Tell them not to go in too deep!!"

In the end, most of the Garberan army couldn't advance, and two hours passed before they were back at their main camps. They had personally confirmed the robustness of the fortress that they'd built themselves.

It grew silent again around Zaim Fortress. Here and there, the torches inside the fort were extinguished, but one could easily perceive that they were diligently standing on guard.

Several hours after the evening battle, a Garberan messenger had headed for Dhum's direction. He came to complain and to reconfirm their strategy. Orba had left everything up to Fedom, while he himself examined the map at the bridge.

There were also several captains gathered at the war council, but Orba hardly spoke a word. Even so, at the end, he didn't give them the final permission to advance. Despite the confusion and doubt, most of them had feelings of anger.

"Is this supposed to be Prince Gil's first campaign?" Oubary murmured almost to himself. A sneer was stuck to the edge of his lips. "I wonder whether him being unreasonable is a form of caution. And we are supposed to tell this to all of the soldiers and hope that, at the most, our caution isn't taken cowardice."

After the war council,

"What are you scheming?" Fedom said, having appeared at the ship's room that was assigned to the prince. "Have you lost your nerves? If nothing else, I'm not telling you to do a bloody suicide attack. Just leave it to me. If you do any more of these selfish actions, I'm really going to have your head!"

His cheeks were quivering in anger as he spoke, but in the end, this was a battlefield. The real prince wasn't even in the area. Orba didn't think Fedom could do anything to him in the current situation.

After Fedom left, Gowen posed a question.

"We also don't know what on earth you're thinking. To whom do you actually feel the need to show mercy?"

"It has nothing to do with showing mercy. I'm sorry, but I'm in a position where I can't tell friend from foe."

"Friend, foe? Are you talking about Garbera?"

"Them too."

It wasn't only Orba who didn't have confidence in the Garberan forces. Actually, the long-serving general Rogue Saian was watching signs among the Garberan camp, aside from the enemy's movements. Although the amount of people who would contemplate betrayal was probably no more than a tenth, if they turned coat in the

middle of the battle, they could very well suffer a great deal of harm. The emotional unrest could be huge. And if Ryucown pulled out his forces at that very moment, they might cut through to them in no time.

"However, you don't plan on taking your time and keep besieging them, do you?" Shique said. "If they *do* receive supplies from Ende, this will drag on and on, and the morale on Garbera's side will plummet. If Ryucown remains, more civil wars will break out over the place, and it might even escalate to a war that splits up their entire country."

"It won't just end with those who consider changing sides raiding our camp at night. They'd want to take Prince Gil's head, rescue Princess Vileena – things like that."

When he heard Gowen's words, Orba grinned. If an opponent had seen him like this during his time as a gladiator, and Orba hadn't been wearing a mask, he would surely fly into a rage. After all, it was the type of smile that seemed to terribly belittle the opponent.

"It's fine. Because I'm still waiting for exactly *that* moment to arrive."

Gowen let out a groan – Shique also wondered whether this was some sort of joke – and got a mixed look on his face.

"Orba, you can't be! Is this why you brought the princess along?"

"Who knows."

Not knowing friend from foe didn't only apply to Garbera. He was still not able to grasp the full picture of what happened at Seirin Valley, and Orba – or rather Prince Gil – couldn't put much trust in the Mephian army from the beginning. He wasn't able to make a move with the situation unclear on whoever bound his hands and feet, and whoever was pulling the strings.

Rather than explaining how many tricks he still had up his sleeves, Orba said,

"These soldiers, who are 'accustomed' to fighting without knowing anything, are different. I don't have nerves that thick."

This was actually his only true motive. For he had fully realized what it was that had been lost to him before.

Strengthen your own position, know your friends and your enemies, and collect various information, large and small – if he could pile up all that information into a

stronghold, even bold actions would have their effect. Without any of that, he wasn't any different than a fool going in for a suicide attack.

Be discreet before you start a fight. It will be thorough and fast. You don't have time for thoughts when you're at that point, do you? So the only time you have to think, is now.

Orba thought, staring fixedly out of a window that was furnished in his room.

Chapter 6 = Battle of Zaim Fortress

Part 1

After that, Mephius and Garbera, who had always been mutual enemies, were completely out of step and could only glare at Zaim fortress before them.

When about five days passed after setting up their camps, the distrust in Prince Gil finally increased in the Mephian camp as well. There were rumours among them that he couldn't meddle with Ryucown's cause because wanted to attract the feelings of his to-be-wife, Princess Vileena.

But as there was absolutely no development in the matter, even Vileena herself felt like she was on a bed of nails.

Speaking of what Orba was doing at that time, he would hang around the camp whenever he had the chance. Although he never gave the important orders to attack, he wandered around making strange requests here and there, and everyone in camp had troubles on how to deal with them. They ranged from the posting of the guards, up to the contents of dinner.

"You shouldn't stray too far from here, your highness. You never know where the Garberan soldiers may be lurking!"

The Mephian soldiers called out to him in loud voices as Orba was heading down the slopes of the hilled area. They were part of the same team, so surely it was no miracle that there were Garberan soldiers lurking among them.

Then, galloping down the slope, Gowen whispered in Orba's ear.

"Orba, be a little more careful."

Gowen and the rest, as his personal guard, were being looked at by the other soldiers with blank stares. Those formers slaves had been appointed as imperial guards by the prince on a whim. Leaving the nobles aside, the gladiators were naturally the target of hatred and jealousy from the conceited soldiers who bragged about risking their lives serving Mephius.

"The other side of these woods?" Orba asked the nearby villagers he had brought along, unconcerned.

They were Garberans, of course. That the one who spoke to them was the Mephian prince, complicated matters for them, but being surrounded by soldiers armed with guns and swords at the moment, understandably didn't make them want to try to oppose or deceive him.

"There flows a river. The riverbed's wide but, still, if Lord Ryucown's soldiers move their numbers over there, they'd be completely visible from this camp."

Orba stood on his toes. Indeed, in the beginning he had only seen the usual scenery of a riverside. But now he noticed that, if they would focus their soldiers over there, they would probably be spotted right away.

"What's your command?" Gowen asked, keeping a respectful tone in front of the soldiers. "Basically, it'll be nearly impossible for us to lay an ambush for Ryucown's forces here."

"*If* it's Ryucown."

Giving his enigmatic reply, Orba then went off to yet another location. Here and there some soldiers and commissioned officers bowed their heads, but even though they saluted perfectly upright, there was hardly any respect in their eyes when they saw 'Prince Gil'. He even heard voices whispering that they'd rather place Prince Gil on a lenient confinement and make General Oubary their commander instead, if it meant they would otherwise let victory slip through their hands.

Letting the soldiers wait behind, Orba headed for the pens where the dragons were being kept. The smaller dragons used for the war were all packed in there together. Among them, he could see the shapes of the Tarkas' group large- and mid-sized dragons. There were animal trainers in the employ of the military, but Orba called for Hou Ran, who'd become a member of the Imperial Guard, instead.

"Orba, are you done with the mask?"

"Ahh," a strained smile appeared on his face due to Ran's direct words. "How are the dragons?"

"The children from the army are always in a bad mood. Almost all of them are being drugged. I can't come to terms with them here, Orba. Do something about those guys if you've gotten so important."

It looked like Ran was in a bad mood as well. With 'those guys', she probably meant the animal trainers.

"I get it. But even as a prince it's impossible to do it right away. For now I'll make sure the dragons from the Group won't be getting any more drugs. I'm being led around here and there, but if the dragons get irritated, I'll have that trouble to take care of too."

"Obviously."

Concerning the sudden change in environment, it might have been her who had integrated the most successfully. Stretching out her hand between the bars, she brushed the dragons' snouts like she always did, to the surprise of the other animal trainers.

Then, as Orba and the others looked around the camp here and there, they happened upon some trouble stirring at the edge of camp when the sun was about to set. The person in question was Garbera Kingdom's Princess Vileena. The hatch to the warship's hangar was open. There were several high-speed airships used for scouting lined up in a row, but Vileena was being stopped from boarding one by the soldiers.

"Let me go!" Vileena said, as courageous as ever. "Unhand me! It's useless to try and stop me!"

"But, Your Highness. You're a guest here in Mephius. Aside from protecting you, we cannot accompany you anywhere without receiving strict orders."

"That's why I said I'll go alone!" Vileena said, worked up, when her eyes met the approaching Orba. "If you want your orders, why don't you ask the prince over there?"

"It's fine, step back," Orba said.

After the soldiers retreated with dissatisfied looks, he and the princess were the only ones in the hangar. Still with her hand on the airship's seat, Vileena gave him a fleeting glance. The Mephian airships were mainly modelled after wyverns, but other than that there were hardly any differences with the Garberan models.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked.

"What?" the young princess raised an eyebrow. "May I ask you a question in return? What do *you* want to do, Your Highness? It's because *you're* doing nothing at all, that I can only resort to taking action instead."

"Oh? Are you telling me you're going to rally and shed blood with your countrymen?"

"T-That's not it. Something like that…"

About to fly into a rage, Vileena took in a deep breath, not wanting to be riled up by his comments.

"Without Mephius's aid, the Garberan forces are only going to be cut through. Blood has been spilt already. I cannot bear to watch it."

"Even if I launch the attack, it'll be useless. Besides, I can't do anything either way."

Suddenly, he started having a more careless[14] way of speaking. He could keep an act in front of other nobles and generals, but when he was in front of her, he was not at all able to keep up appearances. This princess was much too straightforward, and to him, concealing his social status unconsciously gave him a strange feeling of guilt.

"What do you mean?"

"It means that Ryucown is more than aware that Mephius will go after him."

"So you've set up some sort of trap? But even so, why do you handle it all so indifferently. What if they fear, and merely tremble and watch, not doing a thing?"

"Things have already been put into motion. We've surrounded them with 'Princess Vileena' as our flag bearer. I'm certain at this time things have already begun, I might even say things will soon come to a close. Even if something does still happen, it won't change the current situation."

"That's…"

Realizing what it was the prince pointed out, Vileena lowered her head. With the sun setting at the same time, there was a slight pink glow on her cheeks. As if she'd once again swallowed down all those feelings, like anger and disgrace, she raised her head.

[14] Orba just spoke in the way he normally talks, using おれ (ore) for "I". When he's with nobles though, he uses 我 (ware) or another more dignified way of saying 'I'.

"I certainly acknowledge my shortcomings. The truth is that I was about to meet with Ryucown by myself, although even I don't think I can make an end to this by myself. However, for this reason, you have to get out of my way. If I can only let my voice come across when I speak with Ryucown in person, for we both consider ourselves Garberans, it should be possible to open his eyes to another conclusion. One other than an honourable death in battle."

"But above that, if we happen to lose you, we'll likely completely fall apart. The hands that just managed to join with Garbera's will be cut loose."

"You are quite right, I will admit it," Vileena said sullenly.

Her face, pretty like flowers on a windowsill, soon distorted with the hatred and biting her lips.

Geez… Orba murmured in his head. *This princess, she certainly holds pride and dignity in what she says, so why does it sometimes feel like I'm exchanging words with someone from the village.*

Having gained the upper hand, Orba was about to chase away the princess, when,

"Why you're being so calm is nothing short of a mystery to me," she said. "Tomorrow, Ryucown's and Garbera's forces may strike each other again. If that happens, those soldiers will die in vain. Are you able to carry the feelings[15] of all those men? Aren't you the one who hated wasting their lives for the sakes of the nation and its nobility?"

She'd no doubt said those words just for the irony, but they stabbed Orba's heart like daggers. Gasping in surprise, this time it was he who lowered his head in shame.

She may be right…

Orba hadn't considered the soldiers' feelings concerning the current battle. It was more important to determine the outcome of a battle, than all of the sacrifices made. It was just like the point of view in playing a game of chess. However,

That's the thinking of nobles that I hate most.

And at the same time.

But I believe that, right now, this is necessary.

[15] This has a double meaning, as "feelings" 思い (omoi) can also mean "weight" 重い (omoi).

When he'd been just a regular boy from a rural village, when he'd been made to kill others as a slave, both the harboured hatred and the intent to kill had been real, but at the same time it was also true that he couldn't gain victory if he wanted to protect the lives of each and every enlisted soldier.

Under the fiery sky, like oil in flames, Orba was too shocked to move, his heart burning with that contradiction.

"What seems to be troubling you?"

Because he was keeping quiet, and it was clear to any outsider that he seemed to be in a state of shock, Vileena gave a slight frown and changed her tone.

"Nothing…" he said.

"But haven't you started to look worse?"

Orba opened up the distance, as the princess was edging closer.

"That's not it," he said. "Princess, as it is, if the Mephian troops participated with Garbera, the battle would grow more intense, which will only cause a pile of corpses. All the members of Ryucown's army fight while prepared to die. That's why we have to wait for time. In this way, I am thinking of the soldiers. Wait… If I will get a victory the way I think…"

The end of his sentence seemed to melt away with the evening breeze, and disappeared. Without realizing it, Orba was clenching his fists so tight that the muscles in his arms swelled.

The next day, the evening of the sixth day since setting up camp, Princess Vileena finished her meal in her room aboard the ship. Although it was unreasonable to think so, considering it was a battlefield, she felt completely restless from dawn to dusk as she spent her days looking outside.

It was to be expected, but she basically had no one to talk to because she hadn't been able to bring Theresia along with her. There were Mephian pages stationed at the camp, but they kept well away from Vileena unless it was really necessary.

Usually, Theresia was always by her side to quickly take care of things. She would start Vileena's morning by taking up the time to comb the princess's hair. Theresia would always be annoyed because Vileena couldn't be as diligent as her and was never able to sit still, but it was a routine for them ever since Vileena was a child. She

believed she could do it by herself for once, but the job took a lot of time that morning and it was sheer boredom. So now she knew that, every morning, Theresia, who had little free time herself, always took the trouble to gather a wide amount of subjects for them to talk about.

Even though she was on her homeland Garbera's soil, now that Theresia wasn't here, it was actually for the first time that – whether or not she would admit it herself – she had a sense of loneliness, as if she'd been thrown out and left alone in foreign lands.

Six days…

It had only been that long. But it felt more like six years, as if every second cut away at her. Yesterday, the Garberan forces had attacked the fortress again and, as ever, Mephius only gave them unsympathetic support through bombardments.

Of course, not only Garbera was dissatisfied, but voices were also raised one after another on the Mephian side. Vileena knew that it wasn't only the officers, but also some the common soldiers who were criticizing the prince.

Only wasting their forces at this rate, Garbera would have to give up on Mephius' support and request even more reinforcements from the capital instead. And even if the Mephian troops would end up getting bigger in number, Ende would probably not think to invade Garberan territory. Having taken that in account, this also seemed to be the reason that the Garberan side chose not to publicly criticize Mephius.

Because, if that happened, the war situation would only become fiercer. As the prince had said, Ryucown would not yield before an approach with brute force. However, there were also soldiers who joined up with him. And according to the words of an officer who had an audience at this camp the day before yesterday,

"The family members of those who follow Ryucown – the ones who were too old or too sick to head for the fortress along with him – have all committed suicide."

Or so she'd heard.

They probably couldn't bear being on a bed of nails after being exposed as a traitorous family, and if they'd allowed themselves to be caught, they'd be shackled and used as hostages. She wondered which one was actually the real case. But because of this, the soldiers following Ryucown were likely also prepared for anything. Where they were concerned, it just made their bond all the more stronger. They would probably continue to fight with every ounce of strength until the last of them was downed by a bullet.

Vileena stood upright for the umpteenth time that day. She walked along the room's wall and gazed over at the ropes connecting the airships. She walked several steps forward and then, again for the umpteenth time that day, turned back.

She bit down on her lower lip. It was a bad habit of hers that Theresia always deemed to point out.

"Those of royalty should not reveal their true feelings before others. When everyone annoys you, laugh, and when everyone laughs, show them a serious look. Your highness, your face is the face of your country."

She knew what she meant by it. She couldn't be a tomboy princess forever. Because, this time around, her rash actions were liable to influence the country. Without so much as a pause, Vileena again half rose out of her seat. Although her notion of having a direct talk with Ryucown had been dismissed, she couldn't count on that still being the case. She decided to meet up with Gil Mephius once more.

Although there are also rumours he doesn't want to move out of camp…

It was said that Mephius, who'd assumed they would have an easier battle, wanted to give up on this fruitless battle as quickly as possible. And the source of these rumours wasn't from the Garberan, but from the Mephian encampment. Several soldiers had heard, leaked through from the imperial guards, that the moody prince had already grown tired of playing soldier and wanted to hurry back to the palace.

Vileena, her anger flaring up like fire as usual, had been about to storm over to Gil and grill him about the matter in detail. However, Theresia had commented earlier that she couldn't decide an impression of him yet, and Vileena held the same thoughts. She believed that the reason he hadn't given orders to sortie wasn't because he was merely a coward or something, but because he didn't notice or concern himself to listen to the criticism surrounding him.

He's thinking about something.

In yesterday's conversation, Gil had made a remark that hinted at this. First of all, the problem was him. Just like with Ryucown, if she wanted to weigh his true intentions, she would have to get closer to confirm what was going on inside his heart. If she could learn about that 'something', and if they could put their heads together in the process, that would be great.

That's right. I completely forgot!

Vileena suddenly thought back on her own determination in this marriage. Probe out Mephius' internal affairs and manipulate the 'foolish' prince. She unintentionally let a smile slip through.

That's right, that's right! The prince and I can think on this together, and if he doesn't like it, I will just have to kick him until he does.

Coincidentally, while she felt like she was ridiculing herself, there was a light knock on the door just when she was about to stand up.

"Prince Gil?"

Feeling caught, as if her true intentions had been exposed, Vileena uttered his name on the spur of the moment. The door opened and she was blushing red. It looked like it was a page about to retrieve her meal. Vileena formed an unusually rare smile, while her cheeks were burning red with embarrassment, and handed him the tray herself.

Then, as he graciously bowed his head, she noticed he was different from the usual page.

"Princess…"

Hearing the tension in his voice, a certain bad feeling crossed her heart.

"Please hear me out calmly, if you wish," he whispered. "I have come from the Garberan camp. But it's not because I simply want an audience…"

It was that night.

A man with a sloppy appearance had entered Prince Gil's room. He was of his personal guard but, regrettably, had slipped into the Garberan camp right before meeting the important Mephian figure – the gladiator known as Iver.

He quickly summoned Gowen and Shique, and they were startled to see that Orba was wearing armour.

"What's going on, Orba?"

"Have you heard the something from Iver? Don't tell me that the enemy's not Ryucown, but the Garberan army!"

During these past few days, it was the two of them who'd been most surprised by Orba's many outrageous actions. Despite what the words he said next, it looked like he was wearing a nonchalant look.

"That's right," he said, and showed them something in his hand. "They intend to come at us in one go. Hurry up with the preparations. I will take our gift and run for it."

An iron mask, imitating the face of a tiger, glittered dully under the lights of the room.

Part 2

The sun was about to set.

A small group of people approached the bottom of the hill where Mephius had set up their camp. There was a strict watch on the place, of course, but they easily got through the gate that had been put up there. They came as representatives from the Garberan camp and claimed they had scheduled plans for a war council with the Mephian side.

However… the agreed time was actually supposed to be an hour later.

Having come through the gate, they carefully observed their surroundings. And then, at the right timing, one of their members set fire to the powder house near the end of the hill.

Within a single breath, the camp's night of sleep was torn to shreds. There was a roaring explosion and the sight of flames spreading everywhere.

Taking advantage of the huge commotion that would surely take place, like after poking at a beehive, the sound of a stampede came heading their way from the opposite side of the explosion. One of the sentries, who first noticed that it was the Garberan dragonrider unit approaching, died as a dragon's claws tore through him like paper.

Almost at the same time, the front gates of Zaim fortress made a grating noise and opened. A group of elite dragonriders, cavalrymen, and airships burst out with the force of a cannon.

They had only one goal – the Mephian army's flagship, Dhum.

Due to the sudden attack, Oubary wasn't able to give a proper response.

"Release ether propulsion up to lever three right away and ascend! Order the dragonriders to protect the flagship!"

He had a feeling that sending a messenger by airship would already be too late.

It looked like the prince had already secluded himself in his room at this time of emergency and wouldn't come out. Without realizing it himself, Oubary was gnashing his molars.

"Those damn Garberans."

He slammed his fist down on the controls. Those backstabbing Garberans and the charge of Ryucown's army could of course not be unrelated. The thought that they might have planned all of this from the start flashed across the minds of the Mephian leaders. They could have tried to lure the Mephian army away from the very beginning, and staged this entire scenario of Ryucown's army rebelling.

"Reassign the battle formations right away. Start attacking Ryucown's army up front and the Garberan forces at our flank!"

"We can't, General Oubary."

Winged Dragon Commander Rogue immediately voiced his disagreement. It looked like his armour had been put on in a hurry, probably because he had just woken up, having been asleep for the night.

"If we remain in place, we'll only get caught in a pincer attack. It's better to immediately prepare to fall back and leave this camp."

Oubary had been about to shout back at him but just managed to hold it in. Ten years older than him, this general had run all over the battlefield. And they didn't expect Oubary, who was known for his so-to-speak approach of brute force, to be able to deal with a situation like this. Just like that time with Apta Fortress in the south.

"Shit!"

Oubary bit on his thin lips, in contrast to his usual appearance. This unlikely development came just when he thought this would be the perfect opportunity to make a name of himself. Everything was the fault of the prince and his optimistic

'let's wait and see'-approach. It looked like they would have to abandon the fortress after all. And if that was the case, it would be nigh impossible to silence the Garberan anti-royalty faction.

"Has the prince still not come out yet?" Simon came yelling onto the bridge from another corridor.

"One page and his personal guardsmen are protecting the door. They won't let anyone pass on the prince's life."

"He came here, and that's his command!?" Simon unintentionally yelled in front of the soldier. He looked like a man who was so different from his usual self – and he instantly regretted it.

"What about Princess Vileena?"

"Yes. Several of the prince's personal guard are guarding her as well."

He had been quick to prepare all of that. While his suspicions about the prince increased all the more, this was still a state of emergency. No matter what, there were other things that needed doing.

"Haven't you been able to contact the Garberan headquarters?"

Further at the bridge, he could hear Fedom shouting about up to the point that his voice got hoarse.

"We sent out an airship some time ago, but it still hasn't returned."

Woosh…

At that time, a strong wind jolted the dragonstone ship. With all of this, they couldn't even prepare battle formations. A small-sized airship needed to accumulate only a small amount of ether, but its area of activity only covered a few kilometres at best. They needed to increase the distance from this place as quickly as possible.

But will that be quick enough?

With their main force already out of the fort, they couldn't respond to their attack anymore.

The ship, which was still just starting to move, was being targeted with bombs that fell like rain. Twice, thrice – and Simon's legs continued to shake.

Meanwhile, at Zaim Fortress.

There was a hall in the upper part of the fort. Surrounded outside by balconies on all four sides, one could see the fires of war raging over the soldiers. Behind the balcony looking out over the area, a single airship was stored away out of sight. It was meant to evacuate the commander if, by any chance, the fortress happened to fall.

However, he – a man who stood stock still and carried the colour of the distant flames in his eyes – had no intention to use it in the least. It was there only because his followers had begged him to prepare one at all costs.

He was clad in armour and armed with a sword slung on his back. He was tall, and although he was young, he had the kind of grandeur that didn't allow others close. He didn't move an inch and stood there with a hand to his trimmed beard, looking much like one of the heroes in the paintings that decorated castle corridors.

He was originally a knight from the Kingdom of Garbera, the general of the Second Air Fleet, Ryucown. Once longing for national fame, the man who'd received hatred and disdain from Mephius and was the object of fear stood staring at the fires that showed the feats of his strategy.

It was a surprise attack he had made in sync with the Garberan camp. Having slipped agitators into their midst had borne its fruits. According to their last reports, the number of generals and their soldiers that had decided to rebel, no more than a hundred, would start a surprise attack on this moonless night. It would also cause turmoil at the Garberan headquarters. Likely convinced that Mephius was surrounded by enemies, they might not be able to quickly come to Mephius' aid.

First you read the lines, then comes the strategy. Before you strike a blow, be sure that you will hit the mark. It could likely be the last move you made.

Just then,

"Milord,"

A soldier turned up in the hall, put his heels together, and bowed. Ryucown still held the position of a military guard, but ever since he led an army of a thousand followers, they had all started calling him a 'lord'. In the end, they were all comrades who had ducked under many blades and run through rains of gunfire together.

There were many people among them who had lost comrades or family members because of Mephius. And, although it was most likely because of Ryucown's talents, it tightened their bonds like iron.

"Allow me to congratulate you. The soldiers have returned from Dhum just now."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes. Princess Vileena has also been brought along safely."

There were tears in the soldier's eyes as he announced this in a loud voice. This was his earnest hope. At the moment, Ryucown's followers were nothing more than rebels – no matter how much more they suffered for their country or how pure their intentions were. However, in order to anchor their name for the future, no, in order to change the course of Garbera's future, he needed to have Princess Vileena.

If he was just able to win her over, he could take over the political movement through the Garberan royal lineage. She was highly popular and revered like an idol, allowing him to gain the nation's support. Moreover, Ryucown was convinced that the princess had the most strong-hearted spirit among those in the royal family.

"She hasn't been harmed, has she?"

"No."

"All right. Bring her in."

Soon enough, led by a soldier, Vileena stepped into the hall.

Her face was as white as paper, but her eyes at least were filled with life as she stared his way.

His heart was struck by a nostalgic feeling. They had met each other a year ago when they were pledged to engage, but Ryucown was reminded of a time before even that – when Vileena had still been nine years old.

Coming to her aid when she'd been taken hostage during the rebellion that was caused by Bateaux, Ryucown had slipped into the castle with a scouting party in order to defeat Bateaux. The one who had guided them had been none other than the princess herself. Although she was still a child, she had proven to be quick-witted, and Ryucown had admired her courageous actions.

Then, the hero who had taken Bateaux's head had been invited to kneel before the princess and received a kiss on the cheek.

It had been about four, five years since then. Naturally, her body had matured all this time. She still hadn't lost her girlishness yet, but within three years, she would

be a beauty that would likely cause trouble not only in Garbera or its surrounding countries, but even in the world across the seas.

Ryucown gave her a respectful bow.

“It has been a while, your highness.”

“General Ryucown. You—”

Vileena fired the first shot, as if trying to let the vigour in her words mask the hesitation.

It was as if her heart was in disarray. It looked to him like a small wooden boat with the sails hoisted too high as it rose over tall whitecaps, so that even the helmsman couldn’t predict where it was going.

About ten minutes before they’d opened hostilities, a man in the guise of a page had suddenly arrived at her private quarters in Dhum and called himself a person ‘from the Garberan camp’. He’d said that a part of Garbera, in concert with Ryucown, had planned to make a surprise attack on Dhum.

Princess, I will guide you to Lord Ryucown from here.

Vileena had turned pale and foolishly stood up in order to warn the prince.

Forgive me.

Whether or not he had expected this reaction, the soldier had been quick to respond. Several soldiers who had waited in the back stopped her from making a sound or move, restraining her mouth, arms and legs. While she tried to resist, she slowly felt her consciousness slipping away and figured they’d probably diluted the cloth covering her mouth with a sleeping drug.

When she came to, she was at Zaim Fortress – the flames were rising up over the soldiers below.

“You—”

“I know full well what you want me to do,” Ryucown gently interrupted Vileena’s words.

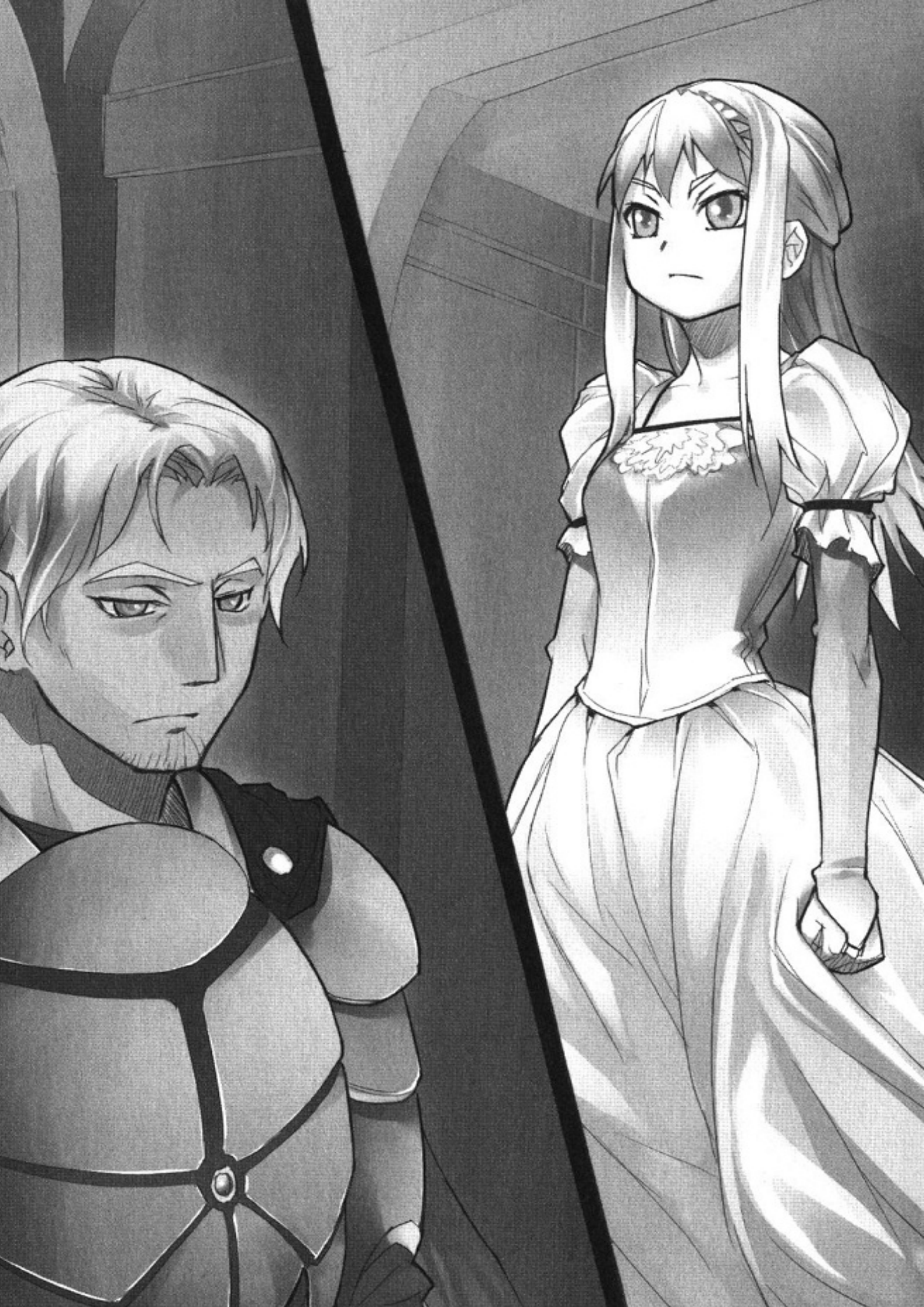
The usual vigour wasn’t there in Vileena’s eyes as she stared at him. Her emotions were raging like fire, but for some reason it didn’t come to the outside. Even for her, as had been the case for Ryucown, certain strong emotions were reawakened from over a distance of time.

One year ago, the two had met when they were pledged to engage. In contrast to the many battles he had faced head-on, he didn't seem able to look her in the eyes even once when he was her fiancé.

Now, his handsome features had gotten a little thin, and he wore exhaustion and sorrow on his face, which might have chafed away at his urban refinement, or maybe he'd just gotten an even wilder taste instead. The ash silver armour he wore had been given to him by the king himself when he'd been bestowed as a full-fledged knight.

"However, I have to stick to my own beliefs. With all due respect, the people no longer follow the current royal family. I agree that lineage is important, but if we rely only on that, the country will be on the way of decline."

"But a civil war will ruin the country instead. Why would you let such a useless battle drag on?"



"I'm not letting it drag on. Actually, the opening of this battle will end in a major victory for us. And our victory will have a huge, lasting impact. Garbera will fear more rebels rising up against them in their country, and it will become impossible to move a huge force. In order to protect their honour, Mephius too will have no choice but to take to the field. Once they realise that they can't easily win, they will make it their reason to immediately pull back their forces. And when that happens, only one last thorough strike will be needed to finish things off."

Outside of the fortress, the battle continued to wage on.

As the fires of war continued to light up all over the place, defying the darkness of the night, Vileena clenched her tender fists. She did not want to see *this*. It was exactly because of this that she'd steeled herself and decided to marry into Mephius.

"I intend to become a martyr to place the foundations for peace," Ryucown said, showing her his black mantle with red lining. "Please, I want you to entrust that life to me."

Further outside, twice, thrice – they could hear the sound of cannon fire.

Part 3

Driving on the momentum, Ryucown's forces were pressing hard on the Mephian army.

As they were struck by a surprise attack, and hadn't expected that it would be coordinated with a group of turncloaks from Garbera, the Mephian forces were scattered about all over the place.

There were some soldiers who tried to escape the flames by jumping on the battleship as it was still trying to gain speed and altitude, and there were those who tried to leave the ship and escape on their own. It was the role of the leader to enhance each individual's strengths and bravery in a war. But the Mephian soldiers that showed such disgraceful behaviour had actually all gone through the ten-year war with Garbera. There should even be many among them who had been heralded with distinguished service.

If they'd been blessed with a good leader, there would probably be ten among every hundred men who would choose this place to die in order to let their leader escape. But unfortunately, the prince who was supposed to bear that duty hadn't given any orders, and it was clear to all that the ship's captain, Oubary, had lost his composure, and that panic had infected even the common ranks.

"This won't do."

The great general Rogue who came out on deck had grasped the situation and was thinking of whether or not they ought to leave. When he looked at the battle situation calmly, they were still greater in number. However, that such a difference could be swallowed up by the moment in the blink of an eye was part of battle.

Oubary was by no means a bad commander. If he had the momentum at his side, he had a unifying power to him that could turn even the most hesitant soldier into a hero. However, in the exact same sense, if he was under adverse circumstances the people around him became ready to flee the scene.

They needed someone here with a backbone. A person who played an active, vigorous role.

"There's no way I'm going to have my bones buried in Garberan lands," Rogue muttered to himself – a grunt that came from the bottom of his heart.

There shouldn't be any general who wished for a certain place or a certain way to die. But it fell to him to protect the prince in battle, or at least let it be a noble death.

He was reminded of the family that he'd left back in his country. And as he thought this, Mephian soldiers came running over as they turned their backs to the enemy, bullets piercing through their heads before they dropped to the ground. Their armour was painted with blood like on a children's drawing, and Rogue placed a helmet over his head.

Exposing this miserable figure here, shames me as a general. But to prepare myself for death in this place, is a general's honour.

He drew his sword with a spark, and started for the tail end of the dragonstone ship, shouting in a loud voice.

"Welcome, thou Garberan traitors! If you want to take another step, you have to step across this man's – Rogue Saian's – corpse! But this old croak will not die alone! He will take a hundred, nay, a thousand people along with him! Whoever wishes to take me on, should think of his family one last time!!"

While the enemy's gunfire showered below without cease, Rogue jumped down from the ship that was just about to gain altitude. Several soldiers who had their fighting spirit invoked, gathered around the old general. The enemy came surging down on them from the front like an avalanche. One bullet grazed Rogue's left cheek. Another completely dug into the jaw of a soldier to his right, who fell down on his

back. Then, just when Rogue was about to charge into them with death's smile on his face,

"Fire!!"

A pleasant to hear, loud scream reached his ears.

It didn't come from the enemy. Rogue realized that the voice came from a hill's wooded area, which was right next to the approaching Ryucown forces. From that very same place came the continuous sound of rapid gunfire.

In the wake of the leading horse-rider being struck down along with his horse, one after another men, horses, and dragons collapsed in spurts of blood.

When the gunfire ended, next came the single command,

"Charge!!"

And swordsmen came jumping out of the bushes. They all took shining swords from either their back or waist, and prepared to cut into the enemy ranks. Those people definitely had dauntless courage. Rogue stared as blood sprayed all over the place, and heads and limbs flew through the air – fading into the darkness of the night.

"Ohh…"

He stared at the scene, letting a single breath of admiration go as the ground rumbled and dragons came into sight from the back where the enemy forces gathered. They were several medium-sized dragons, guided by dragoons riding on smaller sized ones.

"Go, go!!"

"Make way! Or else you'll get trampled!"

Those dragons must have been lying low ever since sunset, biding their time in the grove on the other side of the river. Ryucown's forces and even Rogue himself hadn't seen that coming.

It appeared to be a trick the one girl named Hou Ran had taught them that made this possible. It was hard to believe a person on the battlefield could make such a difference as she did.

Having fallen into such a sudden pincer attack, Ryucown's troops fell into chaos.

Rogue couldn't bear to wait any longer and also rushed in for the attack. With a single blow, he cut off the arm of one soldier who tried to hoist himself onto the ship, probably because he was in a hurry to get away from the enemy, or maybe because he wanted put the head of the prince who was aboard the ship on top of a spike.

While the blood dribbled from the point of his blade, the old general hurried over to the warrior who had given those orders earlier.

It was a man with white hair and brown skin. He didn't look very much far apart from Rogue's own age.

"An ally? But with all due respect, I don't think I've ever seen your face before."

"Ah, well," the white-haired commander – Gowen – gave an awkward smile. "We are Prince Gil Mephius-sama's Imperial Guard. But until recently we've held the status of gladiators."

"What?"

Rogue was taken aback in all sense of the word. He had heard about the prince having employed mere gladiators as his personal guard. At the time, he had thought nothing more of it that another one of the 'fool' prince's capricious whims.

However, the men before him had mettle that was worthy of flying colours and marching banners. With a surging spirit, they levelled Ryucown's forces with a splendid use of swords, axes, spears and guns.

This was exactly the reason Orba had brought them in as a trump card. He didn't place any trust in their individual characteristics at all. On the contrary, he had known how unprepared the gladiators were. They fully relied on their instincts. But as the prince, Orba had made them a promise. Those who brought back the enemy heads at this fight would get a reward the more heads they brought back in, not even excepting their freedom.

Among the rewards they ever got from killing others, this day was the first time that they could win back their own life. For freedom, the kind of freedom where they could earn themselves gold, they wouldn't miss out on any danger. For them, having to face a thousand enemy blades and a storm of bombs raining down on them was nothing.

"Be that as it may, that's quite a feat. To lay down an ambush and stall the enemy's march in this kind of emergency."

"No, no. This was all the prince's idea. It wasn't someone like *me*[16] at all."

Gowen unintentionally used an old way of speaking in front of the Mephian military commander, thinking he ought to somehow keep a dignified tone as an imperial guard.

"Realizing there were signs of treachery in the Garberan camp, the prince considered that would also be when Ryucown's forces would attack and had us place an ambush on their advance route beforehand. He examined this terrain during the day and— artillery, aim for the enemy airship!"

He broke his explanation to give new orders.

"What?" Rogue muttered once more.

As issued, on the other side, the ground shook from the bombardment and a medium-sized Goll dragon roared and fell to its side.

"But, we didn't receive any orders."

"Well… The likes of us aren't able to read Gil-sama's thoughts at all times," Gowen said solemnly. "But if the prince read beforehand that there would be a betrayal among the Garberans, in a situation where he didn't know who was friend or foe, couldn't he just have been afraid of leaking important information?"

"If you want to deceive your enemy… right?"

He sighed, looking up at the skies, but Rogue soon put back the face of a military commander and gave a long look at the soldiers ahead of him. Even more enemy reinforcements were approaching them.

"General, we still need to retreat for now," Gowen said. "We need to join the flagship, and make an end to this chase."

"Agreed."

The two of them stood shoulder to shoulder as if they were old comrades in arms and, with matching breaths, they both issued orders to their own troops.

As their soldiers pulled back, Gowen glanced over to see the enemy reinforcements closing in with even more vigour.

Their morale won't fall so easily after all.

[16] Gowen uses それがし 'soregashi' which is an old, very humble way of saying 'this person'.

Although he didn't say it out loud, Gowen didn't have any reason to get excited just because of their short victory a moment ago. To stop the enemy chase, and to assist in the flagship's evacuation – that wasn't his purpose right now. He had to keep the main body of Ryucown's forces stationary at all costs.

But it's good that it has gone as predicted so far, Orba. Otherwise, you'd be the one in the most danger.

At that time, a cold feeling passed through him as a cannonball hit a nearby tree and scattered wood and fire in all directions. He stooped forward to protect himself and continued running for the flagship, Dhum. The old blood in this body that had stood on the battlefield before was being revived.

"The gladiators?"

Simon received the news and was at a loss for words. Of course, it was hard to suddenly believe. But, it was true that the enemy's pursuit had weakened.

At that time, the page Dinn and several imperial guards entered the bridge.

"I have orders from the prince."

"What?"

Oubary bared his teeth, being as much surprised as Simon.

"After all of this, what kind of 'orders' does our quivering crown prince have?"

"Please watch your language!" Dinn said, causing the agitation to show on his face. "It was the prince's decision to invest his own personal guard."

Oubary glared at the small boy. He was flanked by ruffian-like men to his left and right. But even now, he thought this had to be some kind of joke.

It was then that Dinn conveyed the message from the prince to those on the bridge. The soldiers below had to put in such a formation to meet with Ryucown's forces, for it wouldn't be long for the main Garberan force to join into the fray…

"He said, 'A squad of both the cavalry and the infantry will join up with the imperial guard until there is relief from Garbera, so that they can attack the betrayers from both sides. The main force will centre around the flagship Dhum so that it can fire at the attack forces from the fort.' "

The inside of the flagship turned into a strained silence when they realized they weren't going away from the fray of battle.

Well, Simon thought, stroking his chin. *Is the 'current' prince the same prince that I've come to know?*

"Idiocy," Oubary said in a low growl. "Won't we only suffer losses if we reposition our troops in the midst of battle?"

"No, the number of enemies isn't that much."

"General Rogue!"

The old general Rogue Saian had appeared on the bridge, gasping for breath. His helmet and armour were bathed in enemy blood, rising up like steam. However, the smile on his face had a blood-curling intensity to it.

"Thanks to the actions of the imperial guard, we have recovered our troops' morale. At a time like this, Sir Oubary, one must issue forth an appeal."

But his gaze implied,

Didn't you say we needed to attack the enemy just a moment ago?

As it was hinted to Oubary like that, there wasn't much he could say in return.

"Exactly." This time it was Dinn who pitched in. "The prince too, encourages everybody from atop the bridge… Can't you hear him?"

Certainly, over the bridge, hoisting the national flag high on a pole, a man was raising a loud voice aimed at the many soldiers surrounding it.

His face entirely covered with a helmet, clad in a silver armour, the 'prince' reprimanded the soldiers who continued to escape the turmoil, encouraging them to once more file back into their ranks.

"Please, prince."

Even though the 'prince' raised his voice, he was shaking underneath all that armour. His physique and height were the same as Orba's – or rather Gil's, considering the people here – but it was the gladiator Kain instead.

"I have but a poor vocabulary. I can't just repeat what has been said to me – so go... fight! You are soldiers who carry the pride of Mephius. Got it? Just end this quickly!"

Ryucown and Vileena were still standing face to face with the colours of fire behind them.

“What do you mean, entrusting my life?”

“I want you to become my wife.”

Ryucown’s proposal was straight to the point and Vileena felt as if her breath stopped for a moment. She once more tightened her small hands and immediately regained the strength of her resolve.

“And, what do you plan after that?”

“I’ll declare a new king has ascended the Garberan throne.”

He pulled out the sword slung over his back and made his announcement as if he’d thought of it just then.

“What do you think you can achieve with just one fortress?”

“If we rout the Mephian army today, many officers and men will come to me. Revolts will rise all over Garbera, hastening the preparations for my plans.”

“And all of this is will eventually help out Ende. If you put this through, sooner or later all of Garbera will be subjugated by Ende.”

“I’m not that big of a fool. Ende has put its attention on Mephius. All they want is to grab a foothold to the west. All the better if Garbera is in disorder, so they don’t have to worry about it. That’s why they haven’t come out into the open and sent any men – I wouldn’t either. Even if we don’t pull through here, we will have catered to their plan to raise hostilities with Mephius again. Although it will be difficult to truly rely on such a halfhearted alliance, it is much better than the humiliation of joining hands with Mephius.”

“Both make little difference,” Vileena loudly confessed with all the vigour she’d been holding in. “It makes little difference to our citizens. Just how many thousands of people will become the victim of your single-minded plans, thoughts, and pride?”

Vileena didn’t even realize those were the exact same words Prince Gil had used against her before. Ryucown, on the other hand, showed no quarter.

“Isn’t your royal family raised from a pile of corpses? Let’s end this childish argument. Having the true pride of Garbera, I took action only because I want to

make a nation of true knights. Look at the world, princess. This is a conflict that will end a government of treachery, oppression and double-crossing. It's only pure-minded knights who can truly save this world."

"....."

"Knighthood is a wonderful thing. The elected are imposed with a self-discipline to their duty, always wanting to have a pure spirit. Those are the right kind of people to carry out our politics. It's good that peasants rely on someone named as king or emperor in troubled times, but the country is only engaged in a bloody war due to simple greed. As it is, Garbera, the country of knights, has lost its ideal of pride. So, first I will have to change Garbera – no, I must return it to its roots. Garbera, as a true country of knights."

"I commend your patriotism. But if that's so, what do you need with a body sworn the Mephian royal family?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that this body has already exchanged its wedding vows."[17]

It was a lie, and obviously Vileena couldn't help but feel repulsed inside. However, she didn't hesitate in the least. She wanted to completely crush this Ryucown, who seemed to be utterly possessed by something.

"You lie, your highness. You know the subtleties of a man and woman. Such an act isn't possible."

"You only say that because you do not want to accept it. Now, if I've lost this purity you speak of, and if I've already been held by this 'filthy existence' of a Mephian, you should stab me with that sword right now. Isn't that your ideal?"

Vileena spoke in tears, pinching the point of the sword with her fingers and pressing it against her neck.

Ryucown opened his eyes wide. Further in the distance, the sound of artillery roared again like thunder. The Garberan warrior holding the sword and the princess praised as the flower of Garbera stared at each other.

"Were you that pleased with Mephius?"

[17] What she means is that she already has sexual intercourse. The term for 'exchange wedding vows' (夫婦の契り) can also mean 'have sex as a husband and wife'.

"If we simply brand them as barbarians, we can only be accused of being ignorant. Besides, the country doesn't have any blood ties. It is just like you said. The royal family is not a cornerstone, the sense of pride for their vassals and their people is the same – you can find the same light in that nation. Just who on earth will follow a man that can decide all by himself what this pride is?"

"You've thrown away your pride *and* your country, princess," Ryucown decided. "Or maybe we can conclude that the young Princess Vileena has grown up. You hold the spirit of a soldier. However… because of that, you will be a hindrance to our cause. If you live and cannot recognize our views—"

He suddenly pulled back his sword. However, he looked quite grand as he placed it on his shoulder.

"—I at least want you to protect the Garberan royal family's pride by dying."

"What?"

"Alas, to retaliate for Garbera's betrayal of their alliance, our princess Vileena has been killed by the hand of the Mephian prince."

"If that happens," Vileena said, sounding hoarse. "Won't Garbera unite under a single cause?"

"The situation can only improve from here on."

Vileena shifted her eyes away from the point of the sword. There she saw Ryucown's eyes, as calm as ever. What was so different about him from the youth that had snuck into a castle with only a few men five years ago? Was it like back then? This was the action of a man who sincerely believed in the burning ideals he had as a youth and hadn't let those ideals grow old.

"Farewell, princess. The first decoration I've ever received in my life, was your childlike kiss."

His sword drew a glimmering arc. The princess only blinked once during that time. A tear dropped the instant she lowered her eyelids, reflecting the approaching sword.

Vileena was crying. She was frustrated at her own powerlessness while she'd truly believed that she could come to terms with him if they came face to face. This act of violence caused by Ryucown's 'purity' disheartened her. For the first time since she was born, Vileena felt despair, and she was fated to have her life end immediately after.

Then, the glimmer of the sword was dropped down toward Vileena's slender neck.

Cling!

An exquisite ring interrupted the sword's arc just before it reached her. It was a dirk that was suddenly thrown, and Ryucown had changed the trajectory of his sword to intercept it.

"Who are you?"

He turned his gaze towards the entrance where one swordsman stepped out from between the pillars. Although he was clad in Garberan armour, Ryucown didn't recognize that face. Or rather, he couldn't discern the man's face.

The swordsman who stepped forward, carrying a sword in his right hand, had his face covered by an iron mask.

Chapter 7 – Mirage Kingdom

Part 1

"Who are you?" Ryucown asked again.

"A gladiator."

With that simple reply, the swordsman charged at the rebel general at full speed, wielding a sword with both hands.

The blow came within an inch of Ryucown's face, and he responded with a head strike of his own. The masked gladiator quickly distanced himself.

The wind from the high-speed exchange raised a whirlwind between the two duellists.

"A Mephian? How did you sneak in here?"

"Who knows?"

During that short exchange, the hall across from the two burst into chaos. Warriors garbed in the same gear as the gladiator clashed with Ryucown's troops. Every

member of this group was an elite fighter, handpicked for their ability to do battle in a chaotic situation.

Sparks flew and curses were exchanged. Shique was dual-wielding twin blades, decapitating one foe after another, while the giant sword-slave Gilliam swung his axe with all his might, cutting through enemy flesh even though they were in full armour.

The masked gladiator struck again. Ryucown side-stepped the blow, then brought his sword down in a vertical slash.

The swordsman steadied his centre of gravity by spreading his legs and caught the blow. He then immediately used the rebound, the instant Ryucown was pushed a step back, to launch a vicious attack.

"Oh, not bad."

There were two, three, then numerous blows with the two locked in a stalemate.

"Tell me your name. With such skill, you must be famous."

"Who knows."

Repeating the words he spoke earlier, the masked swordsman – Orba – lashed out with a swinging strike.

The 'gift' Orba had mentioned at the Doom's bridge earlier was Princess Vileena. He had expected there to be traitors within the Garberan camp and that, as soon as they launched their attack, Ryucown's forces would coordinate with them for a pincer strike.

And the spies within the Garberan camp had done precisely as expected – getting close to the soldiers guarding the princess. Like this, he was able to read the enemy movements. And just before they took the princess off the ship, Orba swooped down on them to save her.

Then, during the confusion caused by Ryucown's attack, Orba and his forces changed into Garberan armour, took the unconscious princess off the ship, and led a battalion of trained soldiers toward Zaim Fortress. Naturally, when Ryucown's force saw them coming, they automatically thought their allies' plan had been a success and even escorted them into the fortress.

Orba's heart brimmed with excitement. He felt like he'd become a main character in one of the heroic novels he'd read when he was young. Everything was moving to his plan, and now he was facing the enemy general one-on-one.

But,

Dammit!

A fourth, a fifth strike; the two warriors fought on and sparks flew with every blow.

Ryucown's skills far exceeded Orba's expectations. Easily predicting the young man's moves, his opponent's sword appeared to come from every direction. And while Ryucown's strikes came from left, right, front and back with daring aggression, he never left any opening to exploit.

Beads of sweat began to roll off Orba's back. He couldn't afford to waste any time there. The longer this lasted, the more enemies would be able to reach the upper floor. If they followed his strategy, the flagship Doom should be heading toward the fortress while finishing off the main rebel force, but it was difficult for a newbie like Orba to predict how long that would take.

The only thing he could do, was to utilize every minute, every second he had to finish off Ryucown. Thus all he could do was to wield his sword, strike, dodge and feint.

Vileena held her breath as she watched the scene before her. Of course she didn't realize that the Prince Gil she knew and the masked duellist were the same person. And although the battle seemed to be on equal terms for a while, her eyes began to see the tiniest differences between the two fighters.

During their numerous exchanges, Ryucown kept observing Orba's techniques. The skills were there, but there was a strange personal quirk within his technique. Especially when he made a long-distance strike, he left his left side unguarded, because his feet didn't follow suit.

Ryucown gave a thin smile. Then he stepped back.

Orba fell for the feint and followed. In that instant, Ryucown pushed himself off the ground. The point of his blade grazed the Orba's face. And when his feet touched the ground again, Ryucown positioned himself next to his opponent's side. Pushing himself off the ground again he raised his sword overhead, and soon enough the point of his blade touched the mask.

"Ugh."

Orba quickly put all his strength into his back, and turned his body to dodge. Ryucown continued to press in. Unable to regain his posture, Orba realized he was being driven back as he tried to block the violent succession of attacks.

“Your plan to infiltrate is amazing.”

Although his face was covered in sweat, Ryucown was still breathing regularly.

“But it’s impossible to achieve victory if you don’t finish me off quickly. Even though you’re an excellent fighter, you already lost in the instant you couldn’t kill me.”

Orba did not have the luxury to reply. He finally realized the truth. His opponent’s skill was greater than his – he hadn’t counted on that. The knight’s swordsmanship, strength, technique, and even experience far exceeded his own. Compared to the unscathed Ryucown, Orba’s side and hips were slightly injured, and one of his armour’s shoulder guards had broken off. He was out of breath, and he could barely hold on to his sword.

In that moment, Ryucown’s troops started gathering in the main hall. The gladiators were also pushed back by their force. No longer able to defend the door, they were driven to the centre of the hall and immediately surrounded by the soldiers rushing in on them.

“Damn it!” Gilliam grunted and raised his axe.

Shique mirrored his stance. There was still a killing intent in their eyes. Knocking down a thrown spear by the soldiers surrounding them, Gilliam said,

“I don’t want to say this, but it I wish Orba were here. The bastard’s an annoying one, but you can rely on that icy cold strength in a battle – what’s so funny, Shique?"

“No, no, you’re right. Although that masked guy is pretty strong, he is far from Orba, right? Oh really, if I knew it would come to this, I would’ve tried much harder to get him here.”

Covered in the blood of enemies and themselves, the duo could still joke away in such desperate straits, but the other gladiators – one had been pierced by an enemy spear, and another had his leg cut off – fell down one by one.

Ryucown was convinced the battle was over. He planned on sneaking in on Orba’s chest and, the moment the gladiator dodged out of the way, make another strike. The two swords met once more, and finally Orba’s sword was sent flying from his hands.

"What?"

It was Ryucown who cried out in surprise.

Confident of his victory, the rebel general had relaxed his stance, and in that instance Orba pulled out a dagger from his waist and attacked. He'd chosen to gamble away his weapon for one desperate attack.

Got it!

Loaded with confidence, Orba piled into Ryucown's body. The rebel troops raised shouts of surprise, and suddenly the main hall was filled with sound of metal clashing against metal.

At the southern side of the hill, the armies clashed with each other under the bombardment of both sides' artillery. The battlefield had already turned into a every-man-for-himself fight. Mephius' and Ryucown's troops mixed with each other in a chaotic melee, and an orange fire illuminated the moonless sky.

"Fire! Fire!!"

The old general Rogue Saian could not contain his excitement and bloodlust, thus personally led his troops on the front line. Volley after volley of shots were being fired, aimed at the line of troops.

Although the Mephian troops held superior resources and numbers, it was their enemy who currently possessed the upper hand.

At the same time, Gowen led a ten-man team to flank the enemy from the right. They had a Baian dragging two cannons along with them. They were hoping to use them to bombard the enemy, but their position was quickly spotted by a patrolling airship.

"Get down!"

As Gowen threw himself to the ground, giving out the order, a bullet flew right before his eyes. A single-seated airship nearly strafed past him and then changed directions, making a sharp ascent upwards. In the course of this action, the plane suddenly lost its balance. One of the gladiators had clung to the tail of the ship. The other gladiators quickly came swarming over, dragging the pilot from his airship.

Although they continued their advance, Gowen's heart was cast under a shadow of impatience.

For Ryucown's forces, this assault was as good an opportunity as ever. Probably stirred by instigators, part of the Garberan army had turned traitor and struck a blow to the Mephian army, sending them into confusion. They didn't need to completely annihilate their forces, inflicting 20 to 30 percent casualties was sufficient. With that much, the Mephian army would no longer see the value of another nation's territory and withdraw.

It was a perfect opportunity. Which was why for someone like Ryucown, who didn't need to think about retreating, there would be no holding back. He would use all of his forces – and it actually went just as Orba had predicted. Weaving their way through that gap, Orba and an elite set of forces slipped into the fortress in order to put an end to Ryucown. And after driving away the enemy's main force, Doom would head for the fort at the same time and occupy it.

That was the idea, but…

According to Orba's plan, the Garberan camp should've immediately joined up with Mephius. Even if their side had fallen into confusion, they would have enough forces to contend with and crush the enemy forces, but the Garberans had made no move. In a free-for-all, confused battle, even their messages became jumbled. He'd be lying if he said his own predictions hadn't been sugarcoated a bit.

In any case, the enemy's morale was extraordinarily high. If one of them fell, another would step over the corpse, or even use it as a shield. Step by step, they slowly pushed forward in their direction. Besides, the Mephian troops didn't even know that their indispensable prince – although only a body double – and princess were inside the fortress.

The Mephians don't have the same fighting spirit. If this goes on, their army will soon fall to pieces. I have to hurry!

And so, Gowen resumed his march. At the centre of the hill, from a place with a good view, he fired his cannon right in the middle of the enemy gunners. One shot, two shots… A pillar of flames rose up with every strike, but three shots was the limit. A new unit of airships was already heading towards their position.

"Make way! Make way!!"

This attack definitely inflicted some serious damage, but the enemy line didn't collapse, not even by a bit. The only thing Gowen could do was to leave their artillery and flee the place with the dragons.

Orba!

If it came to this, Orba just had to hurry and take Ryucown out. Then, they could only hope that their enemies would lose their will to fight. He retreated, the sound of gunfire wailed around him as bullets grazed his shoulders.

Ryucown opened his eyes wide… then he squinted them tight again.

Orba was leaning forward with his full weight bearing down against him. He hadn't drawn any blood. However, Ryucown had barely been able to block Orba last desperate attack. He still carried a 60 cm short-sword behind his back, which he'd pulled out at the right moment to defend.

Orba still tried to use his strength to deliver another blow, but the thrust missed as Ryucown had already moved around him in a semi-circle, and all he could do was fall forward. On all fours on the ground, a blade was placed to the nape of his neck.

I lost.

Orba's body went cold as he felt steel prickling his skin. There was no way to change the outcome. Orba had managed to outwit his foe, but Ryucown's swordsmanship, as well as the Garberan movements, had been a fatal blow.

Having lived through countless battles, this was his first time tasting defeat. For him, it meant that the heart that had been beating only for vengeance, would stop beating halfway.

"I like your gall. If you hadn't been born in Mephius, I would have gladly fought at your side," Ryucown said, as he prepared to sever Orba's head.

"Stop this!"

Vileena's scream rang clearly within the hall. Ryucown tried to ignore her at first but,

"Stop it now!!"

Feeling the second scream carried the force of life or death, Ryucown glanced her way. Sure enough, the Garberan princess was pointing a pistol his way. The soldier right behind her had a panicked look on his face, so she probably stole the gun from him.

Ryucown smiled.

“So, what are you going to do? Shoot me?"

“No,” Princess Vileena said, shaking her head.

Her face bloomed into a lovely smile, making one wonder what she was thinking, and she lifted the pistol.

“I will shoot myself.”

She pointed it at her own temple. Ryucown’s eyebrows jumped up while unrest rose among the soldiers.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Do you have the guts to repeat your earlier words in front of your loyal troops? Your true intentions? While you are a knight serving royalty, your own ideals stray from your true purpose. Do you wish to have them to bear the same burden?”

Vibrant light had come back to the pair of eyes that had held such despair before. Even as she held a gun to her head.

Ryucown held his tongue. He was puzzled by Vileena betting her life like this. Just as the fourteen-year-old speculated, Ryucown could not allow Vileena to die in front of his troops. These soldiers shared his ideals of rebuilding the Kingdom of Garbera to a country of true knights. However, they also revered princess Vileena’s royal bloodline. If they lost their idol, his cause would collapse. Someone like him, who was willing to do anything to create an ideal nation, was in one way an innovator, but in another way the type to be criticized as evil.

While Ryucown and Vileena were engaged in a silent battle, the defeated Orba was crouched at the sideline. His back heaved as he breathed roughly, but by no means had he accepted his death.

From the inside of his mask, he stared at the short blade that had parried his earlier attack.

That’s…

There were letters clearly engraved on the blade. There was no mistaking it.

O, R, B, A…

It was none other than his own name. Orba's heartbeat, that had been on the verge of stopping, firmly started ticking away at a steady rhythm again.

Part 2

“Princess.”

“Your highness, please put down the gun!”

While the soldiers called out to her, Princess Vileena merely looked straight ahead, meeting Ryucown’s eyes. Perhaps due to her determination, there was no trace of hesitation on her snow-white face.

“Princess, how far will you go with this military spirit?” Ryucown said with a sigh. “If… Yes, if I show my resolution in front of everyone here, my determination, just what will you do? We can just stick to the old ways and never accomplish our ideals, and in the end, even if we do get out of this battle, things will stay the same. Isn’t it better if you choose the most beneficial outcome for us both?”

“Then hurry up already. I’ve already found my resolution.”

“Princess!”

“Don’t come any closer!”

Noticing that the soldiers were trying to close in on her, Vileena suddenly backed away. She didn’t move the pistol from her temple even a little, but they still inched in closer.

“Please look, your highness.”

Ryucown pointed toward the pillars on the opposite site, behind which the flames of war kept going on.

"Look at the armies of those mindless Mephians and Garberans camps who, despite their overwhelming numbers, are struggling against our courageous men. Do you not understand what this represents, your highness? Putting aside the cowardly Mephians, the Garberan army has fallen into chaos. Indeed, they are wavering because they can’t decide whether to follow me or not. They do not blindly follow the royal family, and are wondering if those who follow my path aren’t truly the ones protecting this country. This is the answer the people of Garberan have found.”

Following Ryucown’s words, his men raised their voices.

“Princess, please recognize our cause.”

“This battle is for the true pride of Garbera. Please understand!”

Looking over at them, Vileena's eyes met no hostility. There wasn't any hostility in her eyes as Vileena looked out over them. Her eyes even seemed to be sad. From the start, she could never bear them any enmity or ill will. For, in their hearts, they all loved Garbera, and they all loved the flower of Garbera, princess Vileena.

"I don't want to!!" the princess cried out that instant, but for what?

She knotted her brows, had tears in her eyes, and with the pistol still pointed against her head, yelled like a child throwing a tantrum.

"I don't want to! I don't want to! I don't want to!!"

"Vileena-sama!"

"This is the Garbera that grandfather loves and father nurtured!" Vileena said, one tear spilling from the corner of her eye. "Why? Why do such…?"

"Stop uttering nonsense."

Ryucown was backed by a belief that could not be shaken by anything, not even words from an oracle of God, but he got interrupted by someone he hadn't expected.

"Don't call it nonsense!"

With a voice as if coming from the abyss, his words made Ryucown and Vileena look his way. Ryucown, although he had completely forgotten about Orba until just now, sardonically said "Don't move," and again pointed his sword at the gladiator. However…

"That sword, give it back."

"Give it back? What are you talking about? This is…"

"Six years ago," Orba said.

For some reason, the rebel general gasped in surprise and completely swallowed his words. There was now another intensity in his gaze as he looked at the gladiator getting up from the ground, as he listened to the words.

"Six years ago… you were still aspiring to be a knight but were already more of a knight than others. Now it's different. To fulfil your own ideals, you've raised a sword against your liege. You even tried to threaten her with death. Why are you gambling your life? You're so damn intoxicated that you're deaf to the words of your own liege who's also gambling hers. Ryucown, you're not even a knight anymore!"

As Ryucown was about to bring his blade up for a strike, and with everyone's attention focused on the princess, Shique took the chance to break out of his encirclement.

“Take it!”

That instant, Shique tossed over his sword and Orba caught it square on, as if the two had planned it beforehand. Then, Shique broke into a sprint and moved behind the princess, snatching the gun from her hand and pushing it against the nape of her neck.

“Princess!?”

“Your highness!”

“Don’t move!”

As if he hadn’t heard Shique’s words, Ryucown moved in to slash at Orba. By reflex, the gladiator stopped the blow and the two started crossing blades again.

“What are you doing!?” Ryucown said in between with a demonic scowl on his face. “We can’t let a Mephian kill the princess. Seize him!”

Shique clicked his tongue. The mix of terror and confusion on the soldiers’ faces began to fade as they looked at each other. It was now or never. If he waited for the enemy to make a decision, he would be back to being outnumbered.

He had to move… but where to go?

“Sir Gladiator.”

“Huh?” Shique blurted out in a shocked voice.

The princess he was supposed to be holding hostage was the one to take the initiative.

“This way,” she whispered under her breath, using her chin to point at the airship stowed nearby.

In an instant, Shique’s thoughts were the same as hers.

“Got it. It’ll be a little rough, though.”

“I’m used to it.”

Immediately after her reply, Shique coldly aimed his pistol ahead of him and fired. Before its the menacing sound faded away, he grabbed the princess's thin shoulders and began to run. Vileena boarded the airship. While Shique got into the seat behind her, she immediately fired up the engine. Emitting ether, the craft lifted the two of them up in the air.

"I'll bring reinforcements! Wait for me!" Shique called out.

However, at this very moment, the princess hesitated. Within the great hall were the heroic Mephian soldiers and the loyal followers of Vileena's royal family, wishing to restore Garbera to its ideals. They had the courage to put their lives at stake together, and now Vileena had to neglect them.

"Princess!"

As was to be expected, Ryucown's face paled and he started to run straight for the airship. However, the image of a steel blade flashed before his eyes. Spitting at the ground, he met Orba who was charging right into him.

"Go!!" Orba roared.

He blocked a strike that would've sliced his head off, followed by two, three sharp blows. Then he yelled out again.

"Vileena, move!!"

The princess stared at him as if struck. Then, shaking off the soldiers who tried to catch up with her, she flew the airship into the night sky. And, just like that, it melded into the dead of night and disappeared.

"If it's come to this…" Ryucown said, baring his teeth as they crossed swords, "Should I just give the order to kill the princess along with the Mephian army?"

"What!?"

Orba's breathing grew heavier. The black blood had been the main current in keeping up his strength, but it was about to run out. He didn't know what to do, didn't know if he could finish what he had started, and didn't know if he could do anything but watch as things were snatched away from his hands just like always.

But, Orba had a sword – an embodiment for his boiling blood.

"Someone like you—"

"You bloody—!!"

Both their voices overlapped along with the ring of the blades. Although their views were different, with their hearts carrying the same emotions, they weren't so unalike after all.

I won't let you stop me!

Blocking Ryucown's sword while adjusting his own footing, Orba moved to the left, to the right, lunging at his foe, but his blows were equally blocked.

Maybe I just need a little bit more strength. It's all I have left…

If something was blocking his goal, be it lofty ideals, deities, dragon gods – Orba would likely challenge it with only a sword in hand.

But at this moment, Orba was falling back into his old habits. As soon as his opponent seemed to fall into the defensive, Orba used the chance to dive right into him. But, having been waiting for such an attack, Ryucown immediately turned to avoid a stabbing hit, and swung his sword at Orba.

It was just like Orba had seen it six years ago.

Immediately after sparks scattered into the air,

“Gahh…!”

There was the sound of a wail, along with a spray of blood.

Ryucown's blade was bounced off Orba’s quickly drawn sword. Ultimately, he was the one who took the invitation. Expecting to go for the kill, the rebel general had mustered all of his strength into this strike, completely losing his posture. Orba had blocked the counterattack by raising the flat of his blade before him.

Although, he still had to pay a price. A hole was drilled in the upper right part of his mask, creating a clean crack down to the middle.

“Splendid.”

Ryucown struggled to speak as he collapsed, face-up on the floor, coughing up blood.

“Until a few moments ago, I could see a nation of knights… but was this my limit? Tell me your name. I, Ryucown, won’t rest in peace if I’m defeated by a nameless man.”

“Orba.”

Other than Ryucown, none of the soldiers present could hear him say his name.

It was unclear whether it gave the man solace, for Ryucown could not utter another word as only a cough of blood escaped his lips before he closed his eyes. Orba only stared at him in silence.

The man who had slipped into the enemy camp with only a select few people and defeated the rebel Bateaux, now lost his life in the exact same way. The irony of these, later to be described as ‘Ryucown’s last moments’, would be the talk of ages to come.

“Milord!!”

“He killed Lord Ryucown! Don’t leave a single one of them alive!!”

The soldier's fighting spirit was mixed with rage. The gladiators who'd also rushed into a hall formed a circle around Orba.

Just then, about a dozen ships that had gone for an attack on the Mephian air corps came back for supplies. These soldiers realized what was going on, and they all pulled out swords and guns and surged onto the uppermost part of the fortress.

Breathing heavily, Orba thought,

Is this the end?

It was but a fleeting thought in the corner of his mind. During his two years as a gladiator fighting to the bitter end, there were multiple times when he'd thought the same thing. And each time…

I won't let it end here!

Each time he had encouraged himself. And right now, with many swords pointed his way, and many guns aimed in his direction, Orba tightened the grip on his sword.

Slowly but steadily, Ryucown's men closed in. Orba was tempted to step out of the encirclement, but the sword slaves silently stood with their weapons drawn, guarding him. Either side had the relentless urge to kill, and they were ready to turn into colourless bullets charging toward each other, clashing into one another, and exploding when...

In that instant, they could hear a battle cry washing over like a tsunami wave. Visible from the uppermost balcony, an army surged towards them on the outstretched plains like wildfire.

Ryucown's men clenched their teeth, feeling despair, and what would have been a grim decision. They were still prepared for death, willing to fight until the last man standing. And at the very least they wanted to take revenge on the person standing before them who had killed their general, Ryucown.

But now, the Mephian army was approaching them.

"Ah…!"

Suddenly, one of the soldiers cried out with the excitement of a child. Illuminated by a line of fire, fluttering through the night sky, was the symbol of their birthplace, where they wished to one day return with heads held high, and of the nation that they had heartbrokenly cut off from – the Garberan flag.

They looked up in astonishment, several seconds after hearing the sound of a unique airship.

"It's over…! It's all over!!"

Just like when it had taken off before, she nimbly jumped from the airship and onto the balcony – Princess Vileena.

Part 3

What…?

Riding along on the airship, the gladiator Shique was sweating bullets, clenching his fists.

What kind of chick is this!?

The airship Vileena flew, after departing from Zaim Fortress, only kept increasing in speed as it headed into the direction of the Garberan camp. Naturally, Shique was taken by surprise, because he'd expected to go to the Mephian forces. He was a bit worried that she was considering whether or not to return to Garbera altogether.

Just as Ryucown had mentioned earlier, the Garberan camp was likely in the midst of total chaos. They had their hands full dealing with the traitors in their midst and also saw the fires breaking out among the Mephian army. It wasn't such a strange thing that some of the soldiers had strong feelings of heading out and joining Ryucown's cause instead.

Even worse, although needless to say, this was a battlefield.

After sunset, a lot of guns were pointed at any of the airships that might come flying towards them in the dark. Gunshots lashed out at them without asking for identification. Things were at a point where a man like Shique was screaming while Vileena tilted the ship to the left and right. As the ship dropped in altitude there were finally some soldiers who recognized her and screamed "Princess!" and Vileena yelled at them from above.

"Go and attack Ryucown's forces with the Mephians already!!" she ordered in a loud voice.

The moment the gunfire died out, it felt like time itself had stopped. In the distance behind Vileena, the fires of war continued to burn and their colours were reflected in

the Garberan soldiers' eyes. In that instant, Shique saw realization run through them like a lightning bolt. Altogether, it seemed like they truly were knights lifting up their sword at the call of their liege.

"Isn't Garbera a country of knights? Can you call yourself a knight if you cast aside your country's promise and turn your blade against Mephius? How can you face our nation's great ancestors!? Come! Follow me!!"

Surely, like a guidepost falling from the heavens, this was what these knights had needed.

With regret at having taken such a long time to get into position, the Garberan army made their assault. The military force was split into two. One side would go to the Mephians for cover, while the other would push forward to Zaim Fortress. They could easily circle around Ryucown's army, whose main focus was attacking the Mephians, so it didn't take long before Garbera's main force stood before the fort's gates.

"It's all over!"

Vileena stepped forward on the upper part of the fortress among glittering swords and armour.

"General Ryucown has pointed his sword at me. I have, of course, no doubt that he loved his country and its people, but rather than Garbera or its knighthood, he came to love only a country of knights shaped to his own ideals. There's no sense in continuing this battle."

Surrounded by Garberan troops who were born in the same lands, having lost their leader, and being persuaded by their beloved princess, Ryucown's forces had been completely robbed of their strength and purpose.

In fact, the fortress had already fallen. The soldiers cast aside their weapons and sank to the floor, tears flowing from their eyes as they mourned the fallen Ryucown.

It was a complete change from the savage battlefield, the fortress was full of tragic sobbing and weeping like in a funeral. Vileena looked around at the area when, walking around aimlessly, she tripped over her own feet.

"Princess!"

Gilliam, who was close by, quickly supported her.

Looking at her face, she was as white as wax, but it was only because her face was covered with a sheen of sweat, and her lips were a deep red.

"G-Gilliam, you bastard! Shouldn't you let go of the princess already?"

"What's gotten you so excited, Shique? If I let go of her now, she'll fall to the floor, won't she?"

"Then, hand her over to me…"

"I-I'm fine. Thank you," and embarrassed Vileena said, letting go of Gilliam. "Shique and Gilliam - isn't it?"

"Y-Yes!"

"You've continued in excellence since Seirin Valley. You have saved not only my own fate,[18] but also that of both Mephius and Garbera. Representing the people of both nations, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"No, I—" Gilliam said.

"He's right, princess. There's no need to give this man such heartwarming words. He's just an unenlightened lout whose only satisfaction is wielding his axe about in battles and raids…"

"Y-You scheming dog! Listen princess, if it isn't for love or kissing up to nobles, or—arrghh, you probably don't get any of this!"

Vileena smiled at the two who were beginning to cross words. Naturally, Vileena herself also suffered from many pains. However, as part of the Garberan royal family, she had to endure, especially if she wanted to accomplish anything after becoming the Empress of Mephius in the near future.

Then she spotted one other figure among the crowd who deserved special credit. The masked swordsman was already about to leave the grand hall. She rushed over to his retreating back.

"You are the one who defeated Ryucown, aren't you? That's amazing. Since you called yourself a gladiator, does that mean you're also part of the prince's personal guard?"

"Yes…"

[18] In this sentence, the word for life and fate (命) is the same.

"Thanks to you I was shaken from my doubts. I thank you for that."

Vileena meant every single word. That time after she had boarded the airship and been unable to fly away at first, she was still torn between two countries and unable to choose.

Because of those words.

She was weak. She had felt like she was leaving Ryucown's soldiers and this man's companions to die.

But because of that…

She had to become stronger. The foundation of royalty was to become such a person that everyone in the nation could discover the same virtues. That was the duty of those privileged ones. Wasn't that something her grandfather, Jeorg, would have said?

The swordsman arrogantly turned his head halfway to look at Vileena. His eyes were visible through the holes and crack in the mask, and for a moment Vileena thought they resembled someone else's.

Coming out of the fortress alone, Orba walked through the battle-scarred plains. Even though it was the dead of night, there were fires and braziers here and there, and he had no difficulties navigating through the fields without a lantern.

There was the constant clattering of armour as he passed by many Mephian soldiers. Their faces were full of excitement and enthusiasm, and they were probably planning on plundering the fortress. For the moment, the Garberan forces had set up camp outside the gates, but didn't approach any further. As expected, there was still some mistrust. Not only because a part of the Garberan forces had turned traitor and attacked the Mephians, but also because the ringleader of this rebellion, Ryucown, had been *defeated* by Mephius.

Orba, however, didn't think it was worth worrying about.

The heightened emotions of battle had already left him, and now only exhaustion, pain, and despondence remained.

Who have I fought for? And as who have I fought?

It looked like Ryucown had been prepared for his death. Not just when he'd been defeated, but from the moment they met each other, death had been visible in his eyes. Although it was hard to tell how far he would've gone to earnestly reform Garbera, there was no way that his name wouldn't be remembered by its people. For now, it looked like the flames of rebellion were extinguished, but Ryucown's name would likely keep smouldering in the hearts of men.

A mirage.

Beyond the quivering shimmers of hot air, there was a vivid illusion. It was a memory from Orba's childhood days, and yet, hadn't Ryucown kept following his dreams like that until the final end? Instead, having been tossed about by fate, Orba had gradually cast aside such sentimentality as a young boy.

But Ryucown had been different.

Even if he could just take a little bit of that mirage into his own hands, he'd sincerely believed that he had to succeed, fight, or die.

And if he asked himself if that was kind of man he wanted to become, the only answer was to take the challenge head-on and with confidence.

"Hey you! Are you from the prince's personal guard?"

Orba widened his eyes in surprise. Oubary was walking up toward him. Like the commander of a victorious army, he walked with broad soldiers, accompanied to his left and right by two soldiers carrying a sword and gun.

"Yes," Orba replied curtly, stopping in his tracks.

Oubary bitterly twisted his lips.

"That we borrowed strength form the likes of sword-slaves to gain victory will put shame on Mephius's military. Eventually, the prince will have to defend himself before his father."

He was about to leave after grumbling his complaint, but Orba called out after him.

"General," he said.

"What?"

Oubary turned around, putting on an air of importance, but Orba looked down and said nothing. He wasn't able to say anything. He hadn't even imagined he'd challenge him in the first place.

"I asked you something."

If I do it now…

He was almost alone. Looking at the men at his left and right, they didn't make much of an impression.

If I do it now… then maybe…

"Cocky bastard!" Oubary said, irritated, as he took a step forward.

"No. It's just that there are still some enemies left. Please be careful."

"Hmph."

Oubary gave a sneer. Then, he spat on the ground and turned his back.

"Don't get carried away, slave. A dog that doesn't listen to his master has nowhere to go."

Once again raising his shoulders, he headed off in the direction of the fort. For a long time, Orba stared at his back until it disappeared inside the fort. Then he made sure he headed off in his original direction.

Not right now.

He clutched his sword tightly and then let go again. At the moment, he was just the ordinary gladiator Orba and could only strike under the cover of darkness. Even if he successfully ended Oubary's life right now, he would have no place to return to.

When he flung off his mask and became 'Prince Gil', he would most likely have better alternatives than Orba the sword-slave.

The next one to call out to him was Fedom. Taking heed of the neighbouring soldiers, he approached with a smile as if to congratulate him on his victory.

"I hope you're satisfied?" he whispered venomously.

"What do you mean?"

"Playing as an actual soldier, on an actual airship, in an actual war - are you satisfied? Then it's enough. I won't allow you to do any more."

Enough, no more - how many times had Fedom told him those words? Thinking about it, Orba suddenly smiled.

"What's so funny? Listen, you're not yet finished with your duties. The prince will continue to be in danger until the wedding with the princess is complete. I can't have you go to the capital on your own. I'm going to have you monitored with armed soldiers every single day."

Although he was smiling on the outside, he whispered his threats filled with poison. Orba thought the guy was quite talented to be able to do that.

"There are many more people who know the prince than there are in Birac. You have to be at your most careful. If you're exposed - they'll immediately cut off your head."

Oh?

There was something amiss with those words.

I see… it's just as I thought…

He had his doubts up until now. However, now he was convinced.

There was nobody else who knew that Orba was acting as the prince's body double. At least not among the people governing the state. He didn't know the reason for it, but it was most likely so that Fedom could eventually pull Mephius by the strings. Aside from that, there were several other things Orba could think of.

However, he didn't show his sudden realization on his face. He just nodded in response.

Orba went back to the flagship after that, headed back to his room to switch armour with the 'prince's body double' Kain, and went up to the deck as the prince. There were many people gathered together calling out the prince's name, raising jubilant voices and waving their hands in joy.

There, he mingled with Gowen and Shique. They were all pleased to see the others safe, and he walked in the direction of the other gladiators.

"Ryucown even tried to take the princess's hand," Shique said along the way. "But wasn't it Ryucown who'd planned the assassination at Seirin Valley in the first place?"

"He had announced that he was the one who attacked Mephius," Gowen said. "But it's not unreasonable to think that delegates from other countries tried to murder the princess. Still, it's quite a mystery."

"No."

When Orba spoke, both looked at the 'prince'. Maybe he was getting used to it, or maybe some kind of talent was beginning to sprout within, but every time the soldiers cheered when they glanced his way, he felt a sense of pride inside of him he'd never felt before.

"I've also thought about it a lot. But who would have profited the most if Prince Gil and Princess Vileena both died back then?"

"Well, who?"

"That's…"

The white moon glittered in the darkness of the night.

Orba touched the sword at his lower waist, which was different than the one he usually carried. It was the shortsword he'd taken back from Ryucown. The blade was glittering as if it was still new, and it had been engraved with Orba's name.

Epilogue

There was a lot of wandering.

The strong emotions that got carried along weren't meant for the current Orba.

This was not the road he himself had expected to walk, but if he expected to obtain something after all this wandering, for someone who'd been forcefully manipulated this way, wasn't it the means to take revenge with his own hands?

I…

Can't you take up the sword for your own purposes if you didn't hate someone? With those feelings in his heart, dressed in brass armour, he got down on his knees on top of the bright red carpet.

The imperial capital Solon - at the audience hall.

"You've decorated your first campaign with a brilliant victory, we are more pleased than anybody else, Gil."

Courtiers sitting in a row to his left and right, the man sitting on the throne before him was the emperor of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius, Guhl Mephius. His white

hair and beard were both long and full of waves. Although he had deep wrinkles on his face, and deep eye sockets as if they were hollowed out, he was still fully shining with vitality.

"Gladly."

"It seems you've used various ideas. But I'm truly pleased that Ryucown's head has been severed by Mephian hands. This is more of a victory than we expected."

"This was all because of Lord Fedom's wisdom. General Oubary has also been of great assistance during my first campaign. It was also thanks to the soldiers and retainers by your guidance, father. I merely borrowed their strength."

"Oh?"

The expression on Guhl's face was unusually calm as he nodded. It looked like His Majesty was definitely pleased, and the senior statesmen made eye contact with each other showing satisfied looks. Earlier, although it seemed like he showed a much more severe attitude towards his true son, all he wished for was his own child's growth. There wasn't a parent that didn't love his child.

"As a result from our conference with Garbera, it's decided we should once again put our attention on your marriage with Princess Vileena. Until then, she is a special guest of ours. But we can understand passionate feelings, so keep your lovemaking to a low so it won't cause any trouble."

His smile showed he was making a joke.

Embarrassed, Gil bowed his head and said, "I will." It invited a laugh from the lined-up audience members.

Princess Vileena had been given a private room in the inner palace. Together with her attendant Theresia, she could expect a well-established way of life for now. Moreover, when they decided upon a new date for the marriage, Garbera would no doubt return the captured territory of Apta in the form of a 'gift'. The Kingdom of Garbera wouldn't be able to face Mephius properly anymore if they didn't.

For many different reasons, Prince Gil's accomplishments were grand.

The atmosphere in the hall had been calm from the beginning to the end, but at the final moment Guhl spoke these words,

"Even Ende won't be able to make a move so easily. However, if this happened in Garbera, it could've happened anywhere. From now on, to keep the authority and

strength within the Mephian Imperial Family, we will have to protect the peace within our country. Gil, you also bear this responsibility."

He hadn't forgotten to give the anti-imperial groups their fair warning.

"Onii-sama!"

Right after he came out of the audience hall, Ineli came up to him and offered her congratulations. Lifting the hem of her skirt, she gave him a curt bow, but Gil gave only an apathetic reply before turning his back to her again. The beautiful girl knitted her brows.

"That's a cold attitude you're showing me. And that while all this time I've been counting the days, looking forward to your return. I've been worried about you these last few days, brother, and could hardly stomach dinner. And now you won't even tell your cute little sister one story about your travels?"

"Ahh…" Gil forced a smile and made eye contact. "I have enough to tell, but can we do this some other time. I'm just a little tired."

"Fine…"

With those words, Ineli left it at that, but not because she was worried about the prince, but because Gil had already avoided her gaze and turned his heels to walk away. She was unable to call out to him again, her pretty looks warping into scorn. But then she suddenly froze for a different reason.

That was because that one look the prince had given her.

It looked the same as the one from the masked warrior in the arena.

After that, Prince Gil went back to his private quarters in the inner palace. He had nothing planned up until tonight's victory party. Like Ineli, there were some nobles and militiamen who sought an audience to congratulate him personally, but he declined them all.

"Aahhh…"

The moment he arrived in his room he laid down on the bed, arms and legs spread wide.

"That's quite unbecoming, your highness," his page Dinn berated.

He had been given the task to continue taking care of the prince. Fedom had arranged for the chamberlains who had taken care of the prince thus far to be replaced with the glitter of gold. Naturally, he didn't want the prince's true identity to come to light.

His entire body seemed to sink into the splendorous bed but, on the other hand, he couldn't calm down. Besides, this room was much larger than the one he'd been lodged in along with dozens of sword-slaves. Being alone in a place like this, not knowing who was lurking where, he didn't think he could rest his mind.

Orba jumped back up, although not because of Dinn's words, and headed for the room's large windows. Facing the verdurous garden outside, it looked out over Solon's orderly townscape.

It starts here.

What kind of person could he become, and what could he accomplish? Up until now, he still hadn't found an answer to the question his brother Roan posed on that starry night.

Would he wield his sword to chase after his childhood dream of a successful life, would he raise that sword to take revenge on those that had bereft him of everything, or would he find a way to pursue the people he'd lost.

All of it.

Indeed. Exactly because he didn't know what to do, he only had to do all of it. These were the only means Orba had available for himself. He couldn't wish for a better position than an imperial prince.

He now stood among those that he once, in his childhood days, believed weren't looking at the same things the common people were. If he embraced all the things he couldn't reach before with both his arms, he might be able to discover something new.

And besides, he wanted to find out how far his own existence, and the power his existence held, would take him.

Of course, there were many obstacles. Fedom, and the question of where the real prince was, dealing with the Garberan princess, the anti-imperial faction, and—

"How can you have the nerves!? Keeping such a nonchalant act together!"

It was the first thing Gowen said after being invited to the prince's room. Shique nodded and said,

"And during your audience. On one hand, you're a former sword-slave disguised as the emperor's son. But on the other hand…"

Orba stepped in and took over the conversation.

"It's like an arch villain trying to manipulate the prince, right?"

Dinn gave a startled look.

Even though the one behind the assassination attempt on Prince Gil and Vileena was likely neither Garbera nor Mephius, Orba suspected that it might actually be Guhl Mephius himself.

Ende was the most suspicious actor in wanting to kill the two. However, their delegation had been especially invited and they never uttered a word that could've labelled them as suspects. There was no way to interrogate them in such a way that they could fabricate the 'truth'.

On top of that, if the members of both royal families had been killed, it would have resulted in a joint attack with Garbera on Ende from both sides. Two countries that had been mutual enemies yesterday would become firm allies the next. It would've given even better results than marrying the prince and princess.

For Guhl, compared to the profit of dividing Ende's lands with Garbera, the life of prince Gil - of the crown prince - wasn't as valuable.

He was the emperor.

And after all of this, Orba had to face such a person as his 'father'. Someone who, for him, was still the mysterious living symbol of this 'kingdom'.

"This time, the assassination failed because Ryucown's attack interfered with things. In fact, to the emperor, Ryucown's subjugation seems even more convenient for a future with Garbera," Shique said in a gloomy tone.

"But to some extent, I may have ended up someplace even worse than the gladiator ring," spoken like an elder, Gowen said those significant words. "At least it hasn't been something like a surprise attack. Even so, a parent and child sharing blood that kill each other is just sad."

Orba didn't reply and continued to look out of the window.

In this line of business, everything was a battle. If he couldn't live without ending up victorious, then things weren't all that much different than before.

Orba only ever chose the path of victory, or he wouldn't have lived this long.

There were many heroes in this world. Among those running through a world of war, Gil Mephius hadn't been the type to trouble or possibly entertain historians.

But, although he'd been belittled by his vassals as the 'foolish prince', now, triggered by the marriage to Vileena of the Kingdom of Garbera, he had turned to wisdom in the blink of an eye and made a sudden transition into being called the 'Dragon of Mephius'. It was the kind of tale that historians could weave into the imaginations of the people.

But none of them knew.

Gil Mephius's true identity.

The man known as the masked gladiator, soon after casting off the mask of an iron tiger, had acquired a new mask of flesh.

Nobody knew.

Afterword

Hello everyone - Tomonori Sugihara here.

I brought out a new work after a year, but I was surprised by my own writing. Has it been a year already? Wow, that went by fast.

My previous work 'Legion' was a story about human emotions and a ruined world. It felt like the story itself was a huge barrier for me and there's no mistaking it that it took me a lot of energy. So, every time after I proofread the manuscript before mailing it over, I remember falling back on my bed and looking up in despair.

"Man, this sucks. Damn it!"

I didn't want to write such a story ever again.

I didn't want any more clashes in the world of human emotions. There are already too many bittersweet romance novels like that. I'm sorry if I'm generalizing my own work like this, but I wanted something different than 'childhood friends unable to express their feelings', because there's enough of that in the real world…

I realize that I'm not giving my previous work any good publicity right now, so please don't misunderstand - I'd love for you to read it - but in the end, I wanted to do something completely different for my next work, eagerly hoping that I'd succeed.

"After reading this, let's just make a more uplifting story."

"There's no teenage conflict this time."

"This character is far too personal, let's liven things up a bit!"

"These bloody developments and these dark settings - I'd better leave them out."

"Ohh, I'm getting a little motivated!"

"All right, let's write a plot with this vigour!"

Well… the book you're holding your hands right now is the result of all these many twists and turns.

Eh?

Twists and turns you say?

Really, I feel like grabbing this author by the neck and throw him about a bit - he doesn't even know what he wants!

Honestly (and now I'm entering serious mode), 'Legion' became a story about the heart, while this tale is a story about the flesh.

As in my previous work, the protagonist will be troubled by hardships and conflict, and he'll strengthen his body to cut through it all, wield his sword, and use the knowledge gained by all of these experiences.

Experience of battle, intrigue, and love - what will this boy turned sword-slave gain, and what will he lose?

Personally, I'm looking forward to what's going to happen in this tale.

-- Tomonori Sugihara